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# John Adams Decides for Colonial Independence

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**JOHN ADAMS DECIDES FOR COLONIAL INDEPENDENCE**

by

**Joseph James Hermler**

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts**

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## LIFE

Joseph James Hermiller was born in Toledo, Ohio, December 9, 1925.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

One of the foremost names in the annals of the American Revolution is that of John Adams. The name of this patriot is associated with those of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Hancock, and others in the formation of this country. John Adams is one of the Fathers of the American Revolution. His life is one of great importance, and it gives a keen insight into the American rebellion. John Adams was first heard of as a patriot lawyer in Boston. In 1774 he was a representative from Massachusetts to the First Continental Congress. During the deliberations of the Second Continental Congress he affixed his name to the Declaration of Independence. Of the contribution of John Adams at this time it has been said that "no one could have filled his place between 1774 and 1777."<sup>1</sup>

To round out his career, after the early days of the new country John Adams filled posts of service abroad. He sought and obtained aid from foreign countries during the war, and after

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<sup>1</sup> Mellen Chamberlain, "John Adams, the Statesman of the American Revolution," John Adams, the Statesman of the American Revolution, with Other Essays, New York, 1898, 93.

the war represented the colonies as the first American ambassador at the Court of St. James. From foreign service, however, Adams was recalled in 1789 to assume the second highest office in the new government, becoming Vice-President. In 1797 the highest honor and position came when he became second President of the United States.

The Adams story is a story of devotedness, of allegiance to a cause, and of one success after another. That the man was a leader of his countrymen is borne out by his constant occupation in important positions, in controverted problems. The secret of this long term connection with major offices and responsibilities is found in and explained by his early history in the service of his country. Herein John Adams received his start. An examination of the role John Adams played in the achieving of independence is a study of the rise of one of America's great men, and it is an investigation into the development of one of America's leading revolutionaries. The story of John Adams' part in the early history of America deserves close attention, because of its particular as well as its general importance. It is the purpose of this thesis to amplify one particular aspect of this early public life, which will be further delineated.

The constant leadership of John Adams in American history would intimate his start occurred with those of strong

heart. In the natural sequence of events participants in a new endeavor are at times found at its head when the new endeavor becomes successful. The same is quite true in a revolution. In John Adams, thus, one would expect to find a period of time when he favored revolution and independence prior to the actual inception of either. How long that time would be would depend on circumstances, on the nature of the revolution. The American colonists were not deeply aggravated. Their grievances dated scarcely more than a decade. Until 1765 the colonists had been contented subjects of the king. Hardly could John Adams be expected to favor independence before this time, when it was good business acumen to remain with Great Britain. Were he a radical, acting on no reasonable grounds, or were he a person destined by heaven to free his countrymen, early revolutionary tendencies might be visible. But, if neither of these were true, then, as a natural process the man's fervor would increase in spurts as aggravated by incidents, for the American Revolution was like a stew gradually coming to boil. In the life of John Adams, a man steady and constant by nature, as proved by his career, there would be a boiling point, a Rubicon, a time when he crossed into the camp of those desiring independence. This hour could possibly be expected in the beginning of the dispute, by the year 1770. When was this decision in the life of John Adams? There seem to be many answers to the question. A number of authors

have considered the query and varied have been their responses. The length of time prior to July 4, 1776 during which John Adams advocated independence, according to them, has wide latitude. The answers of the authors are worthy of note due to the authority of the commentators.

James Truslow Adams<sup>2</sup> seems to believe that the actual time of decision is unknown but it could have been anytime between 1766 and 1774. Randolph Adams<sup>3</sup> states that for John Adams Lexington wiped out all hope of reconciliation. During his trip to the First Continental Congress is the time Catherine Bowen<sup>4</sup> believes Adams changed his mind. Carl Van Doren<sup>5</sup> writes that John Adams did not decide for independence for the colonies before October, 1775. The impression Mellen Chamberlain's "John Adams, Statesman of the American Revolution" leaves is that John Adams from childhood saw the conflict ahead and which side he would uphold. Adams is straining at the leash for a considerable

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2 James T. Adams, The Adams Family, New York, 1930, 48.

3 Randolph Adams, Political Ideas of the American Revolution, Durham, 1922, 107-108.

4 Catherine Drinker Bowen, John Adams and the American Revolution, Boston, 1950, 458.

5 Carl Van Doren, Secret History of the American Revolution, New York, 1941, 7.

6 Mellen Chamberlain, "John Adams," John Adams, 6-7.

time in Samuel McCoy's<sup>7</sup> imaginative Adams, the Man That Never Died. J. T. Morse<sup>8</sup> states that by the winter of 1774 John Adams had decided for independence and was at the head of the party. The grandson, Charles Francis Adams,<sup>9</sup> in his biography asserts that Lexington caused John Adams to cross the Rubicon, and that Bunker Hill made it final.

The answer to the question proposed, the hour when John Adams decided to propound unreservedly colonial independence, seems a problem much more difficult to solve than at first would be supposed. Varying responses have been offered by the authors. But not all of their answers can be correct. John Adams lived only one life, not many, and there can be only one answer, not many. The evidence left behind, furthermore, can contain only one response. Through the means of this evidence a period of several years might be the minimum to which the hour of decision could be reduced. But an investigation should bring forth one clear answer. Letters, diaries, and journals, as well as more public pronouncements handed down to posterity, should contain

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7 Samuel D. McCoy, Adams, the Man That Never Died, New York, 1928, 191-193.

8 J. T. Morse, John Adams, New York, 1885, 86.

9 John Adams, The Works of John Adams, edited and with a biographical sketch by C. F. Adams, Boston, 1851-1856, I, 168-177.

the desired answer. Some men leave little, but John Adams was a man born with a propensity to write. He set down volume on volume of his inner thoughts, for himself alone or for the benefit of others. The outlook of John Adams, then, toward independence should be recorded, whatever he held through the years. It is for succeeding generations to learn his opinions from his written works.

The purpose of this thesis will be to search into the writings of John Adams for an answer to this question. The controverted issue, it is to be observed, has several ways in which it might be stated. Was John Adams destined by the powers above to save America? Was he long an advocate of independence? Did he favor rebellion by the time of the First Continental Congress? Did he privately espouse complete separation from England for years? When did this man decide upon independence as the only solution in the Anglo-American dispute? These questions indicate that a study of the Adams life from the beginning to July 4, 1776 is necessary. The words of John Adams in the early and advancing years of his manhood will be analyzed and weighed for their relation to the above queries. American history will be the background for the study, since only in this light can the acts of a participant be properly understood. The constant inquiry will be: "What was his attitude toward England at this moment?" The answers to this query, when looked at as a coordinated pattern

flowing through his life, will set forth the history of John Adams' attitude toward independence, and determine the decisive points in his estrangement from Great Britain.



## CHAPTER II

### FROM BASIC CONTENTEDNESS TO OUTRAGED RIGHTS

The first son born to John and Mary Adams came into the world on October 19, 1735. The boy was named John, after his father, and, though the whole world has since come to know the family, no member of the family was known outside a small Massachusetts hamlet at the time or for a considerable time afterwards. The family lived in the small village of Braintree, about fifteen miles from Boston. It was a rural area, populated by farmers in great part, one of whom was John Adams, Sr. In Braintree there was relatively little influence from the larger community of Boston. Braintree, colonial, rustic, and frontier, was in a little world of its own. Only recently the land had been cleared and the frontier moved further west. There was still some fear of Indian raids. The rich lived in comfortable circumstances, but rich men were few. Most men had to be sparing and live as their means dictated. In such early American surroundings John Adams spent the first fifteen years of his life.

The early education of John Adams was obtained at the

local Latin school. When the time for more advanced training came, his father determined that he was financially able to send the eldest Adams boy to college. There were now three boys in the family. The custom was that the oldest son received, if possible, a college education in lieu of his share of the inheritance. John entered Harvard, where it was expected he would prepare himself for the ministry. A minister was a respected member of a community. At Harvard, John was one of the top men in his class, studying, discussing, and debating seriously. In 1754 he was graduated, to enter into a new life, the world of affairs.

In his last years at Harvard and in his early period in the world John Adams ran into religious difficulties. Books, discussions, and events made him doubt and led him to seek the opinion of others. Proponents of a critical approach, emphasizing a greater use of the power of reason, had influenced Adams considerably. Strife and bitterness within religious groups further affected him. The strict conformity toward its views demanded by a Puritan congregation, as well as the manner in which it scrutinized the minister's every act, aroused a deep repugnance in John Adams. Such an attitude gradually came over him that all thought of undertaking any ministry was destroyed. In a short time he formally rejected the ministry by making a contract to study law. He ever remained a religious man, according

to the principles he judged reasonably worthy of acceptance. The proof of the existence of God from order always appealed to his mind. But it was as a lawyer and not as a minister that John Adams was to make his mark in this world. The remaining years until 1760 Adams spent in preparing to take a place in his newly chosen profession.

The average New Englander in mid-eighteenth century America was a fearful man, fearful of trouble from the north. In that direction was Canada. Canada was French, and the French also knew how to make allies of the Indians. New England was English and inherited the old world animosities and national hatreds. Puritan Massachusetts detested Catholic Canada, and had a consuming fear of Popish domination. This fear both bound the colonists more closely together against France and held them more firmly to England. Many colonists looked to English arms as the colonies' substantial defense in any danger. Closeness of blood also drew the two peoples across the seas together. Most colonists could trace their origin back to Great Britain in a few generations at most. There were some advantages and some disadvantages in living at a distance from the mother country, but the colonists expected treatment and protection equal to that of any Englishman.

There were some causes for a less benevolent attitude toward England, however. Friction did arise, and, when diffi-

culties occurred, the very Atlantic which the early settlers had traversed to escape tyranny, gave their children greater security in reacting and voicing their opinions. The fear the religious intolerance which had driven many colonial forefathers across the ocean, might also cross the waters fostered distrust. And the English occasionally gave some grounds for this fear. Another source of division was the secondary position the colonies assumed in overall English affairs. Colonial soldiers did their part in the American phase of English wars, and were proud of their victories, only to be chagrined when the peace treaty traded away their gains, and even land, in return for English advantages in other parts of the world. The condescending and blustering attitude of irresponsible or antiquated English officials and officers also irritated the colonists. An order for the quartering of troops inflamed Boston in 1757. To the colonists, further, it seemed at times that, if they were going to be saved from the Indians and the French, they would have to do it themselves. Little English support appeared, or bad leadership rendered it impotent. Viewing this, some colonists reasoned that the colonies were on their own in this most important measure, that efforts were even being impeded by English bungling, and that, therefore, it would be better if in all ways the colonies were independent. The English perceived the situation and remedied it. It was a passing grievance, as the other

reasons for dissatisfaction were. Though differences existed between the colonies and England, never did they reach the state where things were irrevocable. They were the disagreements of a parent with the child who is angered but always basically contented.

Young John Adams was a loyal, contented subject of His Majesty, the King. John had no basis for opposition by inherited family hatred, by religious fanaticism, or by any other special reason. As any other young man, he seems to have paid only a modicum of attention to politics. In the spring of 1759 he summarized his interests:

Now let me collect my thoughts, which have been long scattered among girls, father, mother, grandmother, brothers, matrimony, hustling, chat, provisions, clothing, fuel, servants for a family, and apply them with steady resolution and an aspiring spirit to the prosecution of my studies.<sup>1</sup>

In 1756 John rejoiced at the English victories of Johnson and of Monckton and Winslow in Nova Scotia. He had a wholesome fear of the French and of the fate of New England were the frontier bastions to be destroyed. The naval triumphs of Admiral Boscawen to the north cheered him.<sup>2</sup> In 1760 English strength and weakness in foreign engagements was studied, and it was "our navy,"

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1 John Adams, Works, II, 70.

2 Ibid., 24.

"how can we be called the leading power," and "are we the most respectable?"<sup>3</sup> At the accession of George III John Adams pronounced a hymn of praise in his honor. The new monarch was heralded as a religious man and a friend of good government.<sup>4</sup> Governor Bernard, of whom others were later to be contemned for saying there was good in the man, was commended for his speech convening the legislature. The speech, Adams said, contained no trickery but good sense.<sup>5</sup> This was John Adams in the years 1755 to 1761. Fifty years later he summed up his mind at this time: "I rejoiced that I was an Englishman and gloried in the name of Britain."<sup>6</sup> His was a mind devoted to the existing authority and contented with the conduct of the present rulers. John Adams was a normal New Englander and contented royal subject. He was not the man "with no sentimental attachment to England ever,"<sup>7</sup> which James Truslow Adams in The Adams Family would have people believe. Nor was John Adams the man destined from birth to oppose England, nor, again, was he a person eliciting unusual

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3 Ibid., 109-110.

4 Ibid., 117.

5 Ibid., 109.

6 Ibid., IX, 612.

7 J. T. Adams, The Adams Family, 29.

early characteristics.

The year 1761 marked the change, or, rather, it marked the beginning of the change. In this year the Writs of Assistance were put into use in Massachusetts and their legality was quickly questioned. The opposition effort was highlighted by the famous address of James Otis. One of the impressed auditors of the speech was John Adams. The latter wrote in 1817 that in this speech American independence was born.<sup>8</sup> In the year 1817 John Adams was writing extensively on James Otis, endeavoring to describe and vindicate the latter's place in the march to independence. The reason for this was the immediate publication of a book, proclaiming Patrick Henry as the herald of the American Revolution. To establish the place of Otis Adams emphasized the importance of this speech. But did this oration at the time initiate a new and long term attitude on the part of John Adams? Did it have a violent, disrupting effect? The man from Braintree remarked that everyone, including himself, went away from the hall ready to take up arms against the Writs. And herein is appraised the real effect of the speech; it was of immediate, but short range, effect. Opposition was directed principally at the Writs, not at England or an English policy. There is no reason to believe from his writings at the time that John Adams

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<sup>8</sup> John Adams, Works, X, 247.

was seriously swayed from his previous attitude toward England. The Writs were the source of irritation, not an English policy as it was to be later. In this light the eulogy of Otis must be considered. The address and the Writs momentarily caused a pause in the relations toward England, but they did not begin a continuous line of resistance to the mother country.

The conduct of John Adams in the years immediately following the controversy over the Writs bears out the conclusion that no basic change of mind occurred. In the years immediately succeeding 1761 there was no mention of disagreement with Great Britain or appearance of rancor, nor was there hostility to the king's officials. Private concerns and business were the all-consuming objects of attention. In 1763 he was numbered among the opposition to James Otis in a bitter controversy among the members of the Boston bar. Would a man complete in his devotion to another be found to take part in violent opposition to him? It would hardly seem so, and yet, this is what John Adams did two short years after he had been, as it were, brought completely to the feet of James Otis. John Adams during these years simply was not pervaded by a sense of wronged right, which was so evident later. The sense of wronged right would immediately be followed by its logical cohort, just opposition. But neither of these were evident in the years shortly following 1761.



The event which made John Adams seriously reconsider his relationship toward England was the Stamp Act of 1765. This Act was passed by parliament with the explicit intent of raising revenue. And there was to be rigid enforcement. Violations were to be tried in an Admiralty court, which meant trial without jury. People in the American coastal area objected. The colonies, they said, had been subject to parliamentary regulation of trade, for some regulation was needed in a far-flung empire. The English parliament was the logical legislative body on which this power of regulation should devolve. But never had the colonies been subject to certain collection of a tax that was purely and expressly for revenue. Colonial assemblies, not the English legislature, the colonists argued, levied revenue taxes for America. The Stamp Act gave John Adams pause in his relationship toward England. A serious obstruction was placed to the fulfillment of devotion and allegiance to the mother country. It led to more than a pause, however, for never again was the old relationship renewed. It could not be for the spirit of the Stamp Act was henceforward continually present in varying parliamentary legislation affecting the colonies.

Lawyer Adams felt only revulsion for the Stamp Act and all it meant. It aroused his full wrath and indignation. The Act was described in his writings as "that enormous machine fabricated by the British parliament, for battering down all the

rights and liberties of America."<sup>9</sup> Again it was said: "If there is anyone who cannot see the tendency of that Act to reduce the body of the people to ignorance, poverty, and dependence, his want of eyesight is a disqualification for public employment."<sup>10</sup> Sam Adams and Thomas Cushing were praised for their perception and understanding of the value of liberty. Resistance had to be sustained and more than passive obedience was to be exhibited, for passive obedience would have been "by implication at least an acknowledgement of the authority to tax us. And if this authority is once acknowledged and established, the ruin of America will become inevitable."<sup>11</sup>

America reacted as a unit. Courts, custom houses, and probate offices were shut, and business seemed at a standstill. For a lawyer the closing of court meant no work, no fees. To lawyer Adams this was particularly difficult, for success had just begun to afford better circumstances in the long uphill battle against poverty. It was ruin for America and for him. His talents were in service at this time, however, in articles and speeches against the Stamp Act.

Jeremiah Gridley, James Otis, and John Adams were re-

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9 Ibid., II, 154.

10 Ibid., 167.

11 Ibid., 155.

ained by the town of Boston as its legal counsel. Their charge was to reopen the courts. Affairs were becoming serious. Otis and Gridley were outstanding members of the Boston bar. To be associated with these two men and to be called to represent the town of Boston, although a non-Bostonite, were both distinctions for John Adams. Each of the men argued before the Governor and his council that from necessity the courts should be open, whether the stamps were used or not. Courts were the guardians of justice; without the courts anarchy would reign. John Adams pleaded that the purpose of this law could not be to bury justice since the act of law never does wrong. Laws by nature were to establish justice. Any law which obstructed justice, and the closing of the courts was a type of obstruction, was invalid. The Stamp Act had closed the courts, and, thus, violated the principle of law. The course to be followed was the immediate reopening of the courts. They were to be ready to conduct business and the stamps were to be disregarded, for only under these circumstances would the courts be patronized and function. The youngest of the three lawyers further argued that the Act was in no sense of obligation to the colonists, nor could any judge rule that it was, for the colonists never consented to it. John Adams alone of the counsel proposed the non-representation argument.

The pen of the Braintree lawyer was in extensive use. With the ardor of a zealot he acted quickly when opportunity pre-

presented itself. One opportunity was a town meeting in Braintree. At town meetings the local citizenry instructed its representatives to the provincial assembly what the prevalent local desires were. Customarily a committee was appointed to draw up the instructions, which were then voted on by the populace. John Adams brought his own set of instructions, ready and written, when he appeared at the town meeting about to discuss the Stamp Act. His document was heard, adopted, and delivered to the representatives. The town of Braintree was not alone. Some forty other towns also adopted these instructions and sent them to their representatives.

In his widely approved document John Adams gave the representatives vital arguments to forward the colonial cause. Besides elaborating the non-representation argument, he denied that the colonies could financially survive the Stamp Act. In this practical argument America was pictured as a country soon to wither away and die out. A further argument was also proposed. The judge appointed to decide infractions of the law was a man subservient both to the pleasure of higher government officials and to his own desire for pecuniary aggrandizement. For him each conviction meant a fee. Ordinary English judges by wise custom, however, had long been free of all extrinsic influences, even the king's. Since this jurist was without the aid of a jury, the Act also contravened the principle that no free-

man should be condemned but by lawful judgment of his peers.<sup>12</sup> With these arguments John Adams further agitated against the Stamp Act, endeavoring to effect a legal remedy immediately.

John Adams also employed his pen against the hated Act through four articles in the Boston Gazette. James Otis avowed the content of the articles were an expression of view to which there was as yet nothing comparable. The value of liberty was the theme. For centuries princes had fought to subjugate the liberty of the people, while the latter had fought to preserve their liberty. The founding fathers of the colonies left England and came to America to escape repression. The settlers labored to found and preserve their liberty, once they arrived. The descendants of these early settlers were conscious of their heritage. But now something was wrong. What was it? The colonists were timid in defending their liberties. America, Adams claimed, was suffering more from the "pusillanimity with which we have borne many insults and indignities from the creatures of power"<sup>13</sup> than it ever would have borne from anything consequent on active opposition. Action, writing, speaking, not passive obedience, was the advice of Adams.

Men received the right to certain liberties from their

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., III, 466-467.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 458.

maker, the man from Braintree asserted, The liberties protected by this right were incorporated in the British constitution, under which all Englishmen lived and exercised their rights. The American colonists were brethren with those in England and other parts of the world who lived under the constitution, though the colonists lived under a slightly altered method of legislation and a totally different method of taxation than those, for instance, in England. The English constitution was the sum of all the fundamental documents, laws, and guarantees of English government through the ages. The colonists, Adams continued, had a duty to acquiesce in all in which they were duty bound, according to the agreement signed in the great compact. The colonists, however, were not bound when the principles of the compact were invaded or violated. The great compact was the agreement which the first colonizers signed before sailing for America, and by which they obtained a guarantee of all their rights as Englishmen under the constitution in return for their promised allegiance to the king.

The Stamp Act, thus to John Adams, by nature subverted utterly the colonists to English will. It denied that the colonists had essential English rights and were equal with Englishmen. The Act seemed to forebode civil and political slavery for the colonies. Adams believed that by this path the colonists would be led to irretrievable destruction. For residents of

America there was only one choice. "Consenting to slavery is a sacriligious breach of trust, as offensive in the sight of God as it is derogatory from our own honor or interest or happiness."<sup>14</sup> Servitude, however, seemed planned for the colonists by some people. "There seems to be a direct and formal design on foot to enslave all America."<sup>15</sup> The program, evidently, to begin properly was to proceed by degrees, not at once. Contemplation of the possible change brought deep anguish to the heart of John Adams. No one, he said, could consider the gross indignities, numerous distresses, and flagrant usurpation destined for the cherished rights of the colonists without the greatest grief and many tears.

What, then, did John Adams advocate as a solution for the problem of the Stamp Act? Certainly he demanded the Act be resisted. But what was his program for opposing it? To what limits would he go in resisting the Act? At no time did John Adams ever mention or explicitly indicate utter independence from England as a possibility. The possibility of complete separation from England never seemed to enter his thoughts. The arguments advanced against the Act, however, as has been seen, would, if logically pursued, have admitted no half measures. Tyrannical

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14 Ibid., 463.

15 Ibid., 464.

English acts did not have to be obeyed, and, were these acts part of a policy, then ere long rightful ruling authority would cease to belong to England, having been released by her. The colonies would be then theoretically, if not actually, independent, and would be fully justified, and impelled, to assert a new governmental authority. Either complete subjection to the will of England, or complete independence of the mother country had to result, should Great Britain continue its course inflexibly. But John Adams had not arrived at these alternatives.

The course of action in the mind of the man from Braintree was far less well clarified or delineated. A conclusion of extreme possibilities was not envisaged. The plan of Adams urged and advised the colonists simply to effect the dissolution of the Stamp Act by the use of active legal means and not mere passive obedience. The measure could mean the ruin and destruction of the colonies, the youngest member of the counsel for Boston warned. But, to escape this ruin and destruction, the removal of the colonies from any and all political attachments to England--independence--was not a suggested ultimate measure. John Adams' final reaction to visions of the ultimate ruin of the colonies was simply to bemoan it. All was not bleak and bare in 1765, however, for there was a possibility of the repeal of the Stamp Act in the year 1766.



### CHAPTER III

#### PATIENT, CONTINUED RESISTANCE

The reaction of John Adams to the Stamp Act was intense and prolonged, due to the nature of the Act and to the subsequent history of the policy motivating the Act. The Stamp Act, because it affected everyone directly and because it held the implications of a deliberate policy, intrinsically was of major importance. The Stamp Act was repealed in the spring of 1766. At the same time, however, parliament reasserted the right to tax the colonies for revenue, indicating the legislators were not ready to force the issue but were not backing down on policy.

The long years of assiduous application to the law molded the mind of John Adams and directed his approach in future political disputes. Evidences of a legalistic mind appear repeatedly from this period on. The rational customarily subjugated the emotional in this New Englander. The Puritan religion increased in its offspring the penchant for righteousness and justice. An instance of the legalistic approach was had in 1765 when Adams deprecated actions against Lieutenant Governor Oliver, though the latter was a controverted figure in the colonial dispute with England, on grounds the actions were not based on suf-

ficient evidence.<sup>1</sup> The legalistic approach is the secret to the history of John Adams, the Stamp Act, and England after 1765.

Repeal of the Stamp Act caused joyous outbreaks in all the colonies. The Sons of Liberty, a militant group formed to further colonial interests, were as enthusiastic as any in the rejoicings. But John Adams did not join in on the celebrations. Months before he had stated: "I wish they may not be disappointed."<sup>2</sup> Now he believed disappointment, not celebration, was proper, for he noted a resolve discussed previous to the repeal of the Stamp Act which said "that King, Lords, and Commons have an undoubted right to make laws for the colonies in all cases whatever."<sup>3</sup> Such a declaration was not consistent with the repeal of the Stamp Act. "I am solicitous," John said, "to know whether they will lay a tax in consequence of that resolution, or what kind of law they will make."<sup>4</sup> When the hated Stamp Act was repealed, therefore, the Braintree lawyer avoided the gay observances.<sup>5</sup> To John Adams a particular law was dead but its spirit was still alive. His legalistic mind took in the whole

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1 Ibid., II, 150.

2 Ibid., 179.

3 Ibid., 192.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., 194.

picture, perceiving that the situation was essentially the same after the repeal of the Stamp Act as it had been during its existence. The fundamental difference still existed and was at issue.

John Adams penetrated below the surface. The laws that created the illusion of normality as well as those which forebode ill, but did not affect the immediate situation directly, were known. The average man regarded externals primarily. The entire situation, the legal entity, was of major importance throughout to John Adams. A conclusion was deduced, not from surface appearances, but from the complete picture. Thus, though an Act was nullified in 1766, there was no rapprochement between Adams and England.

In 1768 England endeavored to embody its claim in act again. Attempt was made to collect a revenue tax and to punish violators. Adams wrote: "The root of the bitterness is yet alive. The principle on which that Act was founded continues in full force, and a revenue is still demanded from America."<sup>6</sup> These words were included in instructions he was deputed by the town of Boston to write to its representatives, protesting this latest injustice. Adams continued to oppose the English stand. Great Britain, on the other hand, would not withdraw from its

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., III, 501.

policy, and, therefore, John Adams continued in a role of foe of England.

The chasm created in 1765 continued for the rest of the decade, 1760-1770, and on into the next decade. Parliamentary acts sporadically aroused the people, but, when incitement was missing, many colonists returned to an acceptance of a view that all was well. John Adams never returned to this view. English policy, not only acts, made things abnormal for him. Many companions were found in time of ire. But there times, long times, when men of Adams' mind were few. At times to Adams it seemed the minority was reduced to two persons, Sam Adams and himself.<sup>7</sup> Due to this recurrent isolation the latter's resolute stand over the years to 1774 was often a great trial. He could have yielded, and was so tempted, to gain for example greatly increased legal prominence and fees; but the legalistic bent-of-mind did not allow surrender. To fight the government meant exclusion from a considerable number of positions and fees, otherwise open. But John Adams chose poverty and neglect.

An outstanding example to show the devotion of Mr. Adams to justice occurred in this period. Against the angered citizenry of Boston he took the case of the English captain who ordered the soldiers to fire on the crowd in the Boston Massacre

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., II, 295.

of 1770. The populace demanded the highest penalty be exacted. Patriotic emotions and hatred made lawyers hesitate to take the captain's case. Danger of poor legal counsel and consequent conviction of an innocent man induced John Adams to take the man's defense. He believed the captain had given the order in line of duty. Adams won the case, for the officer was given only a token punishment. Two years later the lawyer from Braintree thought Boston was still aroused against him for his part in the case, but in 1773 joy and satisfaction still overcame him at thought of his service.

Opposition can be said to have been the keynote of this period, 1766-1773. John Adams opposed the policy of Great Britain constantly. Again, however, nothing positive, in the form of independence, was offered in these years. The approach was negative, i.e., Adams desired to remedy the situation by removing the points of conflict, maintaining everything else that was satisfactory. Changes beyond this were not envisaged. That nothing extreme, such as independence, was advocated can be adduced from his writings in several ways. First, in spite of constant opposition to English policy and of continual hearkening to the spirit of liberty, never in his writings was there mention of separation from England as a possibility. Especially will this stand out when contrasted with Adams' conduct in 1774-1776. Second, at both the beginning of the period and at its end the pri-

major concern was not a future independence but a future ruin of the country. In 1766<sup>8</sup> and in 1773<sup>9</sup> Adams believed that ruin confronted the colonies if the plotters carried out their plan to completion. Third, in this period the cause of the difficulty between England and the colonies was attributed principally and above all to the conspiracies of one man, Governor Hutchinson. The machinations of this official were to blame for the dispute. Lawyer Adams was so convinced of the fact that he asserted that the removal of the man would cause the disappearance of the main hindrances to Anglo-American harmony. Sam Adams and he were agreed that "the liberties of this country had more to fear from one man, the present Governor Hutchinson, than from any other man, nay from all other men in the world."<sup>10</sup> John Adams thus sincerely believed that one event, the removal of Hutchinson, should be the chief interest and hope of the colonists. Because the Governor's removal was not an impossible eventuality, the possibility of reaching a solution to the controversy and reuniting the two countries was not out of the question. It might have been said that Hutchinson's removal was not an improbable eventuality. Adams was justified, therefore, in not despairing of

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8 Ibid., 170.

9 Ibid., 318.

10 Ibid., 295.

amicable relations between Great Britain and the colonies.

A hindrance to extreme views was also perhaps given by the popular notion of the day regarding treason. Contrary to the legal theory of the later United States, custom in the British empire held that a law could be against the constitution and still binding. A law, no matter how arbitrary, had to be obeyed if persistently ordered by the government. A perfect parallel was found in Adams' doctrine after the Stamp Act when he spoke of the impending suffering and destruction of the colonies but did not consider the possibility of leaving the empire. Forcible resistance, even to tyranny, was popularly conceived as treason, in England and the colonies.<sup>11</sup> John Adams in 1765 seems to have been affected by the belief that resistance was treason.<sup>12</sup> In the succeeding years, however, he did not again allude to the belief, and at least by 1774 the tenet was replaced by the theory that man has natural rights which no human might contravene.

There were moments when impulse or strain, however, led the man from Braintree to more advanced or radical views. Seldom did this happen, and trying circumstances usually explain the background motivation. Mr. Adams in 1766 spoke of war: "They

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<sup>11</sup> William MacDonald, "American Political Writing," Cambridge History of American Literature, New York, 1933, I, 127.

<sup>12</sup> John Adams, Works, II, 162.

will find it a more obstinate war than the conquest of Canada and Louisiana."<sup>13</sup> In 1771 he declared "that this contention will never be fully terminated, but by wars and confusion and carnage."<sup>14</sup> In 1772 came a very violent outburst: "I said there was no more justice left in Britain than there was in hell; that I wished for war, and that the whole Bourbon family was upon the back of Great Britain."<sup>15</sup> In each of these instances, however, little save ruin was envisaged for the colonies, since small hope was placed in the success of these means. Because these examples were the only occasions in a period of eight years when violence was threatened, extreme means were not the methods ordinarily relied on to effect a solution. Nor did he at any time in writing declare for what the colonies would fight, i.e., to put pressure on England, or for independence, or for any other reason. A clear and concise plan for colonial opposition to England, advancing all the possibilities, simply had not yet formulated itself in his mind. Since at no other time during this period was independence advocated, it should be presumed that these instances prescribed fighting within the empire. John Adams was still an Englishman. The seeds of thinking on independence were

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13 Ibid., 173.

14 Ibid., 278.

15 Ibid., 308.



present but had not yet broken forth through the ground.

Each of the more militant statements were expressed under unusual stress. In 1766 Adams spoke in exasperation at the continuance of the Stamp Act. In 1771 he was driven on by his great antagonist, Governor Hutchinson. In 1772 the words quoted were elicited in the warmth of a conversation and were immediately regretted. This liberty-loving colonist aptly summarized his view in this period when he stated in 1771 that one "person was laying a foundation for perpetual discontent and strife between England and America."<sup>16</sup>

That John Adams had not envisioned independence might be exemplified by a statement of his program of action in 1772. He asserted that, if military executions, annulments of charters, and treason trials became realities, "they had better be suffered than the great principle of parliamentary taxation be given up."<sup>17</sup> No other plan than "to suffer" a severe event, if it should occur, seemed to have seriously entered his mind. The prospects of a simple solution of the controversy between Great Britain and the colonies, by means of the Governor's removal, motivated and encouraged this spirit of suffering and patience.

By the year 1768 the colonies became "our country" and

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16 Ibid., 278.

17 Ibid., IX, 334.

"my country." Ten years previous, as was noted in 1758-1760, the emphasis was on the union between England and the colonies. The English navy, for example, had been "our navy,"<sup>18</sup> a common navy. A change occurred. Adams in 1768 spoke of "my country,"<sup>19</sup> referring to the colonies. Herein is illustrated the mutation that took place between 1760 and 1768.

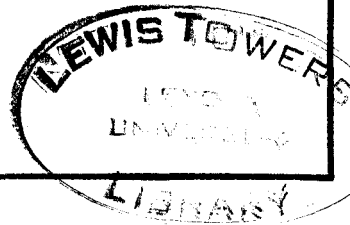
Two personal decisions in this period further bring out that John Adams approached things, not from an emotional, but from a rational viewpoint, proving that he was not a radical, that he was not a fanatic. The Sons of Liberty were a militant patriotic group, in the first line of colonial defense. There was in the group too much impetuosity for John Adams, however. Adams sympathized with many objectives of the Sons and occasionally attended their meetings, where he was warmly received. But he never joined the group.

John Adams, secondly, was not so attracted by the political conflict that he allowed it to blur his vision of the proper harmony called for between the political demands of the moment and personal and family well-being. Health was forever a problem with John Adams. A lawyer finds the monetary returns of his early years small, moreover. To attend to family as well

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18 Ibid., II, 109-110.

19 Ibid., 208.



as to country, such as he was doing, became a great drain on Mr. Adams health and a major block to his fortune. Adams wished to attend more specifically to these particulars of his life. "I am determined my own life and the welfare of my whole family, which is much dearer to me, are too great sacrifices for me to make."<sup>20</sup> This was in 1772. A man with a fixation on an idea, such as independence, would not make such a decision.

In 1773, however, the lawyer from Braintree regarded his decision in the light of a new set of circumstances, and came out of his semi-retirement. A certain General Brattle was defending, with a considerable degree of popular success, the means by which England was rendering colonial judges subservient. The General challenged anyone to dispute with him, singling out John Adams by name. Silence on his part, Adams thought, would indicate agreement of view. There seemed to be a conspiracy of events, driving him from his seclusion, Adams believed, the guiding force existing on a high plane. "A Providence is visible in that concurrence of causes which produced the debates and controversies of this winter,"<sup>21</sup> he asserted. And so, believing that a Principle guided his steps, John Adams returned to public life, and prepared for the critical year, 1774.

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20 Ibid., 298.

21 Ibid., 316.

## CHAPTER IV

### HOPES FOR A PEACEFUL SETTLEMENT LESSEN

In December, 1773 occurred a significant event in the history of the Revolution and of America, the Boston Tea Party. The pouring of the East India Company's tea into Boston harbor manifestly indicated the wrath many colonists had conceived toward the English plan to subjugate the colonies completely to an almighty English will. It advanced the tension of the controversy noticeably; it shed new light on the determination of some colonists to resist. It indicated the colonists were not above using violence as a means.

John Adams showed keen interest in the Boston Tea Party. The Braintree lawyer, in defending the necessity of the Party, vindicated all those connected with it. Were the tea to have been landed, he argued, victory would have been claimed for the principle of taxation without representation. The authorities would not permit the return of the tea to England. Weakness on the part of some colonists, on the other hand, might eventually have allowed the disposal of the tea. It was imperative, therefore, that the "Mohawks" take matters into their own hands, and remove temptation from the vicinity of tea-loving

colonials.<sup>1</sup> The Tea Party was the greatest event yet in the controversy with Great Britain, and it put a new stamp on the colonial attitude.

At the time of the Tea Party John Adams perceived what the new tenor of opposition to England might mean. "Another similar exertion of popular power may produce the destruction of lives."<sup>2</sup> An advancement had occurred that perhaps was irretraceable. In December, 1773 John Adams, however, did not think so. Some people at the time wished the bay were filled with as many dead bodies as there were chests of tea floating around. The patriot lawyer responded, however, that a "much less number of lives, however, would remove all our calamities."<sup>3</sup> Adams still believed that the removal of an official, Governor Hutchinson, would solve the current problems.

The period after the Tea Party, however, was marked by a gradual change in the beliefs John Adams had held for eight years. During the former period violence had not been countenanced as a necessary means to influence England. Other means were looked to as the means to be used toward a successful solution of the dispute. In 1774 a new outlook appeared. In Janu-

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1 Ibid., IV, 90.

2 Ibid., II, 323.

3 Ibid.

ary Adams was musing over his prospects as a soldier. Would he make a good soldier, or would he be a poor one? The verdict was adverse, but he believed he would perhaps be obliged to take up the profession in any case, for the protection of colonial liberties.<sup>4</sup> By July he became quite pessimistic. Prudence, wisdom, fortitude, and integrity, he said, availed nothing without power and legions.<sup>5</sup> The dispute to Adams was heading for a quicker resolution in the year 1774.

In May of this eventful year John Adams wrote that the treatment the colonies were receiving from the mother country was beginning to discourage all colonial petitions to her, on any occasion or for any purpose. He stated that under these conditions we "begin almost to wish that Europe could forget that America was ever discovered, and America could forget that Europe ever existed."<sup>6</sup> In March he summed up the continuing state of affairs. "Troops may come, but what becomes of the poor patriots? They starve and mourn as usual. The Hutchinsons and Olivers will rule and overbear all things as usual."<sup>7</sup>

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4 John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Warren, Warren-Adams Letters, Boston, 1925, I, 22.

5 Ibid., 29.

6 John Adams, Works, IX, 338.

7 Ibid., 333.

John Adams mourned the lot of the colonists as much as ever. His attitude toward a successful solution of the controversy was changing, however, in this year. The last sentence of the quotation in the previous paragraph hints at a truth that was of great significance and that seriously affected and altered the outlook in this period. Governor Hutchinson, the predatory villain for years, changed residence, returning to England. Such an eventuality was advanced in the years up to 1774 as the prelude to a restoration of harmony between Great Britain and the colonies. But Adams now found it was not Governor Hutchinson but "the Hutchinsons and the Olivers" who were causing the trouble. It was not a particular man but a type who was initiating no end of woe for America, it was now discovered. Formerly the tyranny of official acts was credited to the instigation by Hutchinson of the authorities in England. The Governor had been the cause; men in Britain had merely followed his suggestion. Now the men in England had taken over and were following their own desires. When John Adams became more thoroughly convinced of the deeper roots of the controversy, his attitude toward a resolution of the difficulties changed decidedly. As Hutchinson faded into the background, responsibility for the tyrannical policy shifted from the petty potentates of the colonial governments to the more final authorities of English government in England itself, and hope for a successful reconciliation lessened considerably. The in-

creasingly evident fact that the acts buffeting the colonies were not the result of one man's machinations but the rigors following the policy of a government, established the source of the sufferings as of a much more permanent and immovable nature.

The change in the course of events reduced the contending forces to their fundamental components. Beyond the new foe Adams could not appeal. From Hutchinson Adams had constantly had recourse to higher authority in England. The conflict was now closed between the two ultimates. John Adams had shifted his antagonism from Hutchinson to the new enemy by July, 1774. From English justice, in this month he declaimed, the colonies could expect nothing. How much the English would yield in fear would only be doubtful. There was a Minister in England, he went on, the leader of the new foe, who was intent on obtaining money and prepared to use any means thereunto. This man, it was thought, would push things to dreadful extremities to obtain it.<sup>8</sup> Thus, formerly patient waiting held good promise of obtaining a successful solution, but a happy outcome was becoming a more remote possibility now.

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The First Continental Congress met in Philadelphia in August, 1774. Representatives from the various colonies convened in the city of brotherly love, to coordinate their efforts in the

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<sup>8</sup> Adams, Adams, and Warren, Letters, I, 32.



trying contemporary conditions. Manning the posts of representative to the assembly were many of the best men in the colonies. Was there great hope, or much hope, of success for this gathering? Could a colonial Congress be the answer in the campaign for redress? Was the long period of contention about to end?

In prospect John Adams considered the Congress and wondered.

What can be done? Will it be expedient to propose an annual congress of committees? to petition? Will it do to petition at all?--to the King? to the Lords? to the Commons? What will such consultations avail? Deliberations alone will not do. We must petition or recommend to the Assemblies to petition, or--<sup>9</sup>

The opinions of others had come to Adams. Some disdained petitions, pointing to the continued failure of such missives. Some were for resolves, spirited resolves, bolder resolves. Men demanding bolder moves were not according to the mind of John Adams at this time. What was the best means of succeeding in the colonial program, or whether any such means existed, he had not yet decided. His attitude throughout the entire above quotation indicates indecision. To whom petitions should be addressed, by whom they should be sent, whether entreaties would work at all, he had not decided. The last sentence of the quotation, ending in unexpressed thought, could be interpreted perhaps as counte-

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9 John Adams, Works, II, 338.

giving further, bolder, ideas, which it was not expedient to list at the moment. The nature of the rest of the thoughts in the quotation, however, give the key to the Adams' mind at the time, presenting a reasonable interpretation that the last line simply came to an end in further doubt and indecision. The quotation with its parts should be solved by considering it as a whole. Whatever the colonies decided, however, John Adams was sure there had to be success, for death was better than slavery.<sup>10</sup>

The Continental Congress finished its work and dispersed at the end of October. John Adams by this time had become more convinced that fighting and the shedding of blood was the manner in which the dispute would terminate. The talk of this delegate turned often on war. "If force is attempted to carry these measures against us, all America should support us."<sup>11</sup> "It is not so easy a thing for the most powerful state to conquer a country a thousand leagues away."<sup>12</sup> "Opposition, nay, open avowed resistance by arms, against usurpation and lawless violence, is not rebellion by the law of God or the land."<sup>13</sup> "But nothing," John Adams said again in this mood, "will satisfy them

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., IV, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 57.

but blood and carnage."<sup>14</sup> "To this kind of reasoning we can only answer, that we will not stand still to be butchered. We will defend our lives as long as Providence will enable us."<sup>15</sup> It is to be noted that in observing the contents of these quotations, in none of them is there any indication the colonists should take the initiative in starting the fight. Any fighting would still be only defensive, to protect and defend liberties while driving off voracious subjugators. The only plan for Britain, Adams insisted, was to cease interference in colonial affairs and respect liberty.

The situation was approaching a critical stage. So far had England advanced the controversy that only with difficulty did the lawyer from New England believe, could the steps be retraced. No blame, moreover, fell on true, patriotic Americans. The Minister had increased the tension so much that "he had rendered the breach between the kingdom and the colonies almost irreconcilable."<sup>16</sup> It was a malicious plot to deprive, without any justification, the colonists of their rights. Avarice was at the root of it. Were it not for the greedy desires of certain Englishmen, the dispute could easily be settled. Adams asserted:

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14 Ibid., 78.

15 Ibid., 108.

16 Ibid., 91.

In one word, if public principles and motives, and arguments were alone to determine this dispute between the two countries, it might be settled in a few hours; but the everlasting clamors of prejudice, passion, and private interest drown every consideration of that sort, and are precipitating us into a civil war.<sup>17</sup>

John Adams by no means believed the controversy between England and America was of itself insolvable. But he did believe it was fast becoming insolvable from external circumstances, from the evil intentions of certain men.

In the dark days, as seen through the eyes of John Adams, that were pressing down on the colonists at the end of 1774, a lighter or more radical head might have advocated the overthrow of all restraints. Despair might have led another man to speak out for complete abolition of all ties to England. The former resident of Braintree, however, still looked to England as the dominant feature in the government. "We are a part of the British dominions," he wrote, "that is, of the king of Great Britain, and it is our interest and duty to continue so."<sup>18</sup> At the turn of the year Adams asserted: "The fealty and allegiance of Americans, then, is undoubtedly due to the person of King George III, whom God long preserve and prosper."<sup>19</sup> John Adams

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17 Ibid., 106.

18 Ibid., 121.

19 Ibid., 146.

still held that ties of government existed between England and America, and he was not against it of itself, for he hoped the union would long continue and prosper. The ship might have been sinking, but the person who spoke the words of the two previous utterances had not yet abandoned the vessel.

In December of 1774 John Adams wrote a letter in which he deposited an apt summary of his views contemporaneous with the end of the year. The British empire, the letter began, was in grave danger and on the brink of destruction. The sight of danger, however, often has a very sobering effect, arresting progress of a further perilous sort and setting in motion plans for remedy. Englishmen, it was hoped, would come to a realization of their plight, especially before the election at the turn of the year when they could institute reform. The election date was moved up to hinder canvassing, however, and the incumbent officeholders in large part returned. Adams epitomized what this meant to the colonists. It can be seen, he said, that every trick has been "played off against the cause of liberty in England and America; and that no hopes are to be left for either but in the sword."<sup>20</sup> Locally he said: "We are in this province, Sir, at the brink of a civil war."<sup>21</sup> General Gage was at Boston and

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20 Ibid., IX, 361.

21 Ibid.

would oppose the patriots in the war, a violent civil war he again called it. It was not to be a war for independence or separation, it is to be noted. It is also to be observed that in the momentary exasperation at the election, Adams asserted the controversy could end only in fighting and bloodshed. He believed that the brink of the precipice was close, but that it had not yet been traversed.

*may* ( John Adams was extremely solicitous that no infelicitous moves be made in these precarious times. He feared a decisive event could occur, and he hoped it could be avoided. He declared he had bent his "chief attention to prevent a rupture and to impress my friends with the importance of preventing it."<sup>22</sup> The situation was critical and all steps must be carefully calculated. Once an outbreak occurred and blood was shed, it would be too late. "Lives would never go unrevenge and it would be vain ever to hope for a reconciliation with Great Britain afterwards."<sup>23</sup> That Englishmen killed Americans would so impress itself on the colonial mind that it would block all further acceptable union between the two countries. That these Americans would be from all realms of society, including the highest, would have been a noteworthy factor in making the damage

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22 Ibid., 352.

23 Ibid.

irreparable. It was his belief, however conditioned, that reconciliation was still possible, but he also believed that an untoward event might peremptorily close the dispute to further chance for reconciliation. In either case he wished the chances for reconciliation to continue, for he fervently wished a reunion might somehow still be effected between England and the colonies. In his reasoning, it might be noticed, Adams considered the possibility of reconciliation after an incident, even after an incident of major violence. The word rupture, therefore, in the previous quotation even then does not refer to independence or complete separation from England. Independence was, it may be seen, not in the mind of John Adams at the time; reconciliation was. The situation, however, was very serious.

In the early months of 1775 John Adams spoke more ominously. ~~In the spirit of what has just been described,~~ he asserted that, if the English pursued their course obstinately, the colonies, rather than become subject to absolute authority of parliament, would repudiate even the little bit of power they did concede to parliament. "But it is honestly confessed, rather than become subject to the absolute authority of parliament in all cases of taxation and internal polity, they will be driven to throw off that of trade."<sup>24</sup> There was serious possibility in

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24 Ibid., IV, 131.

the offing, he believed, that England might push the colonies beyond the precipice. The colonists would not choose the eventuality, but, if it came, they would choose and fight. And the war would be, not a defensive war any more, but a war of rejection, of rejection not just of certain undesirable features of English government, but of English government itself. This is the first instance in which Adams indicated a complete break from English attachments should result if the contention in the dispute grew in intensity.

Independence was a topic for discussion now. In the Continental Congress John Adams and his colleagues were reprehended repeatedly for striving for it. Independence, some were persuaded, was the goal of John Adams and others. But in the Congress the desire of these men was not independence, though the ultimate wishes of Sam Adams were quite radical. The use of independence in the vocabulary of John Adams was practically nonexistent until the spring of 1775. At the beginning of the year, as has been seen, John was only looking for a return to the status of old.

In the last two chapters the attitude of John Adams toward a possible reunion with England has been followed. Independence has been ruled out as his aim at any time up to 1775. Yet, in the conclusion this New Englander did reach, was the foundation for opposition completely honorable? Was the conclu-



sion reached one dictated by honest convictions? Or was John Adams a radical? Did he desire something beyond what events called for? Perhaps he was a dreamer whose hopes had been exploded. Since John Adams disdained both absolute submission and complete independence, the basis for his opposition seems indefinite. Did the man from Braintree have any basis for the decision he deduced? Was he a man arguing from principles? If so, what were they?

In 1765 the opposition of John Adams to the Stamp Act was firm, though not completely delineated. There existed definite, sound reasons for opposition. In 1765 and in 1774 nature and training demanded conviction before support was given. In the years approaching 1774 the general outline and conclusion of his arguments against England became clearer. By 1774 the case was formulated. In the next chapter the mature basis for John Adams' opposition to Great Britain will be treated. John Adams followed principles religiously, and a glimpse at these principles, applied to the controversy with England, will show forth a solid foundation which brought about a graduated intensity in his opposition to England; and it will prove that he was neither radical nor tory but a man of principle, victimized by events. The basis for John Adams' antipathy to English policy is a very important part in the history of John Adams and the American Revolution. Randolph Adams stated a truism when, refer-

ring especially to this element in Adams' revolutionary development, he asserted that some authors "seem to me to ignore the most important things John Adams ever wrote."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Randolph Adams, Political Ideas, 88.

## CHAPTER V

### A LEGAL FOUNDATION FOR JUST RESISTANCE

The tory side of the dispute with England was advanced cogently in New England by a man who called himself, Massachusettsensis. Submitting a series of articles to the local journals, the man cleverly defended the English side and execrated all who opposed it. The arguments in favor of the recent acts were ably developed, so ably that a definite effect was made upon the colonists. Absolute power of England over the colonies made up the theme and object of this man's journalism.

The writings of Massachusettsensis appeared in the fall of 1774, during the First Continental Congress. When John Adams returned from Philadelphia, an appeal was immediately made to him to oppose the man, the patriots declaring that no one had as yet been found who could match the tory's brilliance. Adams, forthwith, launched into a series of articles countering the stand of Massachusettsensis, and he signed himself, Novanglus. The response of Adams began at the turn of the year and continued until April, when the battle of Lexington put a sudden end to the polemics, even to an article or two then at the printers.

The purpose of Novanglus, it was stated in the beginning, was to set forth a history of the controversy between England and the colonies, starting with the year 1754. Adams went back to this year since he believed evidences of a conspiracy were first manifest at this time. In the articles, the author declared, the objective would be to speak the truth as he saw it boldly, but to use no bad language. As the articles progressed, the first aim was observed closely; the second goal, however, was marred occasionally during blunt attacks on some adversary.

In these articles John Adams eloquently set forth his arguments against the English contentions. They were arguments that had been well thought out over a period of nearly ten years. Since the articles were written for their individual effect and to meet the momentary demands for countering Massachusettsensis, there was no systematic progress of argument, nor was there a well outlined development toward a conclusion. There exists within the writings of Novanglus, however, a thorough study of the situation and a conclusion. A comprehensive legal status was given to the colonies, both toward England and in the community of nations, as well as a solid foundation in law for revolt. In this chapter of the thesis the arguments of Novanglus will be systematized and reduced to logical order, ascending to the final conclusion.

The fundamental cause for the dispute, Adams declared,

was the attempt to subvert the colonial charters. Were this goal to be achieved, the colonies would possess only such rights as England wished to concede them. Three moving forces were adduced to be behind the plan. A titled aristocracy was desired by certain American Tories and would be established, were the endeavor to succeed. An autocratic government was the plan of the triumvirate of Hutchinson, Bernard, and Oliver. Money to offset home deficiencies was to be collected by the Minister and his coterie of followers. The King was never included, or imputed to be interested, in any of these groups. Throughout the writings of Novanglus the King holds the honored and revered place tradition accorded him.

The colonists resisted encroachment on their liberties. Resistance to authority, however, was serious action, not to be undertaken lightly. Lawful authority and definite power of the mother country was being contravened, Massachusettensis clamored. King and parliament were being obstructed in their efforts to do their duty, govern the people, he declared. America could not legally deny its place in the empire and the sacrifices, he went on, that subordination entailed. John Adams, however, denied or distinguished each of these assertions, and declared continued colonial resistance to a determined English policy would be, not a rebellion of men seeking power, but an uprising of men protecting their liberties.

Nature demands liberty, Novanglus went on. England would find that English liberty was simply a right of nature, which was reserved to a person by the English constitution. This English liberty inhered in every citizen, regardless of where he was, regardless of whether he as a colonist had an express charter for it or not. Human nature was ever an enemy of incursion, loved truth, and advocated liberty. Americans had to do no more than apply to this sense, which rested in every human being.<sup>1</sup>

England was endeavoring to curb this liberty of the colonists in America, however, by collecting a revenue tax, the stories were told. English legislators were attempting to appropriate, requisition, and use wealth of people who had no voice in the action. The colonists would be dispossessed in the manner of slaves, since no representatives from America sat in the English parliament. If the colonists yielded, they would be submitting, as slaves, utterly to the will of another. It would have been the absolute rule of a few, as far as America was concerned. A freeman, however, was a person who was bound by no law to which he had not consented.<sup>2</sup> The colonists were not bound, therefore, to obey any act of the English parliament.

The problem of non-representation was a key argument in

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1 John Adams, Works, IV, 14.

2 Ibid., 26.

the American cause. Massachusettensis countered it by offering the colonies representation in the English parliament. Did this eliminate this colonial argument? Novanglus denied it did, for two reasons, both rejecting the feasibility of the proposition. American representatives in London, Adams first noted, would be hopelessly out of touch with the desires of their constituents, three thousand miles away. Conversely, the voters at home would have poor check on their representatives in parliament. Secondly, England could not financially maintain a legislature for the lands represented.<sup>3</sup> The only solution, thus, was to allow self-rule to the colonies, which had been observed until 1754 and which was according to the colonial charters.

The advocate for the tory side returned with further argument. Since, he asserted, the colonies were part of the British empire, they must be subject to the governing body of that empire, the English parliament. That the colonies were part of the British empire Novanglus repudiated. The English government, it was stated, simply was not an empire, but a limited monarchy. An empire was a despotism and an emperor a despot. An absolute monarchy was not as bad as an empire, for in an absolute monarchy decrees still had to be registered. The king of England was simply first magistrate in a republic bound

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3 Ibid., 101.

by laws.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, if the use of empire was meant loosely, that is, to mean government or rule, the question was really whether the colonies were part of the kingdom of Great Britain. Another question was herein introduced. The treatment of this problem will be found later on in the chapter, in its place.

If, however, each colony was under the king, there was a common good among the units under the king that had to be protected, argued Massachusettensis. A superintending body was needed, which logically was the English parliament. The critical issues to the common good were trade and war. Dispirit action would cause harmful consequences to the good of the whole in either war or trade, if the whole were to have any common goal. Since all the units were united in some way, there would seem to be some goal toward which the whole was directed Adams agreed, and, therefore, conceded to parliament as proper control over trade, which had never been denied. It was emphasized, however, that this power of parliament was only by concession of the colonies. Central control over war did not seem necessary, however, as proved by the war a short time before with France. They had made a representable contribution to the English side, Adams averred of the colonies, in their total aggregate assistance. But, even if central control were necessary in war, the incon-

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4 Ibid., 106.



inconveniences resulting from non-central control would be small in comparison with the absolute ruin to liberties which would follow. English control, thus, even in time of war, would be summarily rejected.<sup>5</sup>

The argument that the colonies were not of the empire indicated that there was a distinct separation between America and England. But could insignificant separation and rigid subordination have been advanced by other claims? The tory had further arguments. It was postulated, for example, that, when a nation takes possession of a distant country and settles there, that country, though separate from the mother country geographically, becomes a part of the state, equal with the ancient possessions. Englishmen, thus, crossing the ocean to colonize America had never lost their citizenship, but had remained Englishmen. The colonies were part of the realm of England. The realm of England was in contradistinction to the realm of Ireland, for instance. Realm corresponded to the distinct units under the king. Novanglus had a response. "There is nothing in the law of nations, which is only the law of right reason applied to the conduct of nations, that requires that emigrants from a state should continue, or be made a part of the state."<sup>6</sup> The

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5 Ibid., 115.

6 Ibid., 102.

practice of the mother country had to be reasonable, just, and right, Adams affirmed, or the parent country would lose all connection with the colony.

The examples of other states, in the next point treated, established the colonies in utter separation from the realm of England and its parliament. The proof of this excluded further every argument for the inclusion of the colonies within the realm of England. Novanglus made the argument from other states a key assertion in the American cause. The author spent a great deal of time elaborating and reiterating the proofs of this denial of parliamentary authority.

John Adams first demonstrated that two states, independent of each other, could exist subordinated to the same king. The proof of this argument appealed to history, as did the evidence for much of his argument against England. Instances to corroborate the assertion from the annals of Wales, Ireland, and Scotland, were brought forward.

Wales, in the historical allusion by Novanglus, was under the absolute rule of the king, once it was conquered by Edward I. Absolute and complete rule followed as a result of conquest; it was allowed by the law of nations, if not by the law of nature. Absolute and direct rule by the king prevailed for two centuries, until the people wished union with England. Before the union England and Wales were two distinct realms, and

the English parliament had no power over the Welsh. After the union of the two countries, the distinction between the two realms vanished and England and Wales became one realm. An essential and fundamental part of the act of union was that Wales would have representatives in the English parliament.

Ireland in its conquest by England was dealt with in much the same pattern set in Wales. The Irish were annexed to the crown and ruled solely by the king's authority. Parliament had no authority over Ireland. Again, therefore, being annexed to the crown did not mean being annexed to the realm. Later, Peynning's Act was a compact by which the Irish agreed to observe acts of the English parliament which specifically named them. Any power the English parliament afterwards had over the Irish, thus, was only by voluntary Irish consent.

The history of Scotland likewise illustrated that union of countries under a king did not necessarily mean union of the states into one realm. The kingdom of England and the kingdom of Scotland had the same king, beginning with James I, but otherwise remained separate. The two countries remained two distinct realms in this manner for over a century.

Precedent was established for the colonies in the histories of Wales, Ireland, and Scotland. The colonies as these states were not contained within the English realm, though both England and the colonies had the same king. The voluntary step

in the established pattern, however, the colonies had not followed, for they had never requested inclusion in the realm of England or rule by parliament. This was the second point in the argument against England, leaving the colonies free by precedent from authority of parliament, and, conversely, leaving England with no instance to which she might appeal. The colonies, further, it was presumed, were not subject by reason of royal marriage or inheritance. America was a discovered land. The colonies, therefore, were an entity outside the boundaries of England proper and had no precedent for inclusion under the authority of the realm of England or its parliament. Nor was there any precedent for colonial dependence on the king.<sup>7</sup>

The only bond or link between colony and king was the compact signed by both parties before the first settlers sailed across the ocean. America was a discovered land, not a conquered land; and no rule of law, common or natural, made a lord owner of a land when a subject of his became the first to set foot on the terrain. Feudal law gave the lord of conquering armies rights; common law gave the lord of a discoverer no rights. Thus another claim for the king to power over the colonies was destroyed. America, furthermore, was an inhabited land, purchased from the Indians, not from the king, by the settlers. The appropriation

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7 Ibid., 170.

by Henry VIII of some claims of the Pope likewise gave England's monarch, in any land, no authority. At the time England was wrenched from the Pope's jurisdiction, the Pope claimed a right to all countries and to the possessions of all peoples. Henry, then, thought he had a right to all non-Christian lands his subjects could find; and this idea was prevalent at the time the colonies were founded. These conceptions Novanglus ridiculed as among the most impertinent and fantastic that ever entered a human head, and any claim in 1774 by virtue of Henry VIII's assumption was vigorously denied.

What, then, was the nature of this compact between the first settlers and the king? How did America first come under the king? The colonists had not become subject to him as monarch of England, since in this office he could not grant lands. Common law gave the king no power to grant charters for subjects to settle in foreign lands. Common law likewise gave parliament no authority to govern the colonies. Colonies and colonization were not treated in common law, for the strictures of this law dealt only with the realm of England bounded by the four seas. The monarch did possess the prerogative by which he could prohibit emigration; and, therefore, he could permit the exodus of subjects, but that was the extent of his powers. In his person, then, he permitted the colonists to carry their charters across the ocean. Originally charters had been established to erect

corporations within the English realm. Agents and representatives alone were to cross the seas to America. The governor and the courts were to remain in England; and, under such an arrangement, Novanglus asserted, no one would have questioned their subjection to the realm and parliament. When all the members of the corporation, however, left England with the king's permission, the charter ceased to function as the document for a business enterprise and became a compact between the king and the colonists. The settlers promised him fealty and allegiance; he in return guaranteed to them all the rights which they possessed by right of nature. The arrival of the colonists in America removed them from the realm and parliament. English common law no longer affected them, so that they were free to establish whatever constitution and form of government they wished. Laws in the colonies thenceforward were derived, not from the English parliament or English common law, but from the law of nature and the compact with the king. The law of nature was from the great legislator of the universe. The colonists were bound to do nothing against the allegiance to the king; that was all. The connection across the seas was tenuous, far different from the status advanced by the tories. The fact that the colonies and England had the same person as king was the only link, Novanglus stated, between the colonies and the country the early settlers left behind.

It can be seen that the status and manner of subordination Adams would have had the colonies enjoy is exemplified in the twentieth century dominion status of the British empire. Canada, Australia, and others exist under this dominion form of government. A man is appointed to reside in the dominion and represent the king. The dominions have their own legislatures and are subordinated to England only in trade and some other external affairs. Adams preceded general opinion by more than a century in perceiving the effectiveness of this form of government. The pride and greed of England in the eighteenth century, however, blinded it to any such suggestion at the time.

John Adams' plan of subordination was his middle way or middle course, mid-way between complete independence and absolute submission. Both extremes he disavowed. Mr. Adams wished the colonies independent in all internal affairs, but dependent toward the king and those sentimental things which bound the two countries across the seas together. It was a plan that countenanced a state existing, both dependent and independent.

Would England accept the plan was the question that revolved in the mind of John Adams. The settlement of the dispute, to Novanglus, centered on England, not America, on English readiness to meet terms, not American. Neither parliament, nor common law, nor the king as an absolute monarch or as king of England, nor the exigencies of the good of the empire, nor the

demand of the English realm had any power over America. The parent country could not muster any authority for a command. England was faced with only one choice, therefore, to cease interference in colonial affairs and return to the practices she observed toward the colonies previous to 1754. The colonial legislatures were to rule the colonies. The supremacy of parliament in regulating trade would be, as it had been and was, recognized readily, though it was reiterated again that control of trade was not a right of parliament but a power by consent of the colonies.

Legally and historically John Adams was convinced the arguments in the dispute favored the colonies. Non-interference in colonial affairs by England was, he believed, the only honest and honorable solution possible in a resolution of the dispute. Subjection on the part of the colonists equalling slavery was abhorrent. An invincible barrier was set in the mind of John Adams to any acceptance of the position planned for the colonists by England. As the determination of the authorities in England to enforce the policy became more apparent, the conviction of Adams that the colonies no longer belonged under theegis of England as befitting a free country became more assured. Since England would not accept his plan, and the English program, on the other hand, was utterly insipient to him, a third eventuality, complete independence, loomed on the horizon and came more and more into



view as the only realistic solution in the dispute.

## CHAPTER VI

### INDECISION AMIDST DECISION, THE AFTERMATH OF LEXINGTON

On April 19, 1775 occurred a most decisive event in the history of the American Revolution, the battle of Lexington. Here, in the fields near Boston, the patriots of New England exhibited their willingness to use firearms in their determination to protect their freedom. As the Redcoats advanced along the road in the English plan to surprise and destroy a hidden supply of colonial arms, the path was suddenly blocked by a group of patriots brandishing volatile weapons. At Lexington, thus, and a few hours later at Concord, Englishmen and colonials opposed each other, not by words any longer, but by the last resort, arms and weapons.

The event aroused the colonists as nothing else could have. The time of the final decision in the controversy was greatly advanced, everyone could see. The manner in which the dispute would finally be settled was clearer. The whole world knew of the Anglo-American dispute.

To John Adams the violence at Lexington was no surprise. He had long been fearful of such an event, and for some

time had believed that an armed skirmish was imminent. The reaction of this New Englander to Lexington was definite, though the clear significance of what the battle meant was not resolved in his mind for some time.

On one of the first days in May Adams epitomized the immediate effect of the battle of Lexington. The plans of Heaven include Boston, it was stated, so "that the present dreadful calamity of that beloved town is intended to bind the colonies together in more indissoluble bonds."<sup>1</sup> This pronouncement was made from evidences gleaned on the road from Boston to Philadelphia. The Second Continental Congress was to begin sessions shortly, and the man from Braintree, as a delegate from Massachusetts, made the journey again to the Quaker city. The generous support of all the colonies, it was manifest to him, seconded Boston and opposed England. On May 8 it seemed that "our prospect of a union of the colonies is promising indeed."<sup>2</sup> Strengthening of the bonds among the colonies seemed to Adams to be the immediate import of the battle at Lexington. Time added further conclusions to the conflict's significance.

The fighting at Lexington soon produced a belief that bloodshed and violence necessarily would flow from colonial

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1 John Adams and Abigail Adams, Familiar Letters of John Adams and His Wife, edited by C. F. Adams, New York, 1876, 51.

2 Ibid., 55.

righteousness, should the colonies continue their assertion of inalienable rights. It indicated that physical conflict, not messages and conferences, would decide the impasse. The skirmish on April 19 turned the dispute into a new channel of decision, in the mind of John Adams. Formerly he regarded armed conflict as a possibility, later even a probability. Now he was certain. [On May 29 he exclaimed: "Oh that I were a soldier! I will be. I am reading military books. Everybody must, and will, and shall be a soldier."<sup>3</sup> One month later, on July 6, he declared that fire and sword alone were coming to the colonies from England.<sup>4</sup> The next day Mrs. Adams was told that nothing was to be expected from "the loving mother country, but cruelties more abominable than those which are practiced by the savage Indians."<sup>5</sup> The conviction that a bloody trial was coming to the colonies continued through the fall and winter. John Adams believed as winter approached that "we have nothing to expect but the whole wrath and force of Great Britain."<sup>6</sup> Another effect of Lexington, thus, was the proximity of further fighting.

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3 Ibid., 59.

4 Adams, Adams, and Warren, Warren-Adams Letters, I, 74.

5 Adams and Adams, Familiar Letters, 75.

6 Ibid., 101.

The foreknowledge of the imminent warfare impelled the Massachusetts delegate to an avid interest in colonial military preparations. Arms must be had to negate the force of an enemy's weapons. John Adams, therefore, insisted again and again on the need for military supplies and weapons of all sorts. Supplies, as well as the places to produce them, needed vast augmentation, for the colonies had little of either. The colonists had long depended for the military stores they needed in their struggles with the Indians and the French on England. Now dependence on Great Britain could be disastrous, as a continued frame of mind. Were the colonies to fight the mother country, the very source of the supplies needed would be cut off. So great was the interest and concern of Adams in colonial arms production that he soon was found on the first Naval Committee appointed by the Second Continental Congress.<sup>7</sup> Later, just before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, a Board of War and Ordnance was formed to control and expedite the flow of munitions, supplies, and money for the armies, and at its head, as chairman, was appointed John Adams.<sup>8</sup>

In June, 1775 another manifestation of the battle of

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7 United States, Library of Congress, Journals of the Continental Congress, III, 1775, Washington, 1905, 312.

8 Ibid., V, 1776, 438.

Lexington began to appear. In the months just previous to April, the possibility of solving the dispute between England and the colonies seemed slight. In these months, also, the alternative was first voiced that independence would be the plan of the colonies, should Great Britain obstinately pursue the plan to subjugate the colonies. The actuality of independent colonies, thus, became more of an accepted necessity as the possibility of reconciliation receded. The fighting at Lexington altered the outlook toward reconciliation substantially.

The head of the committee of supplies at Cambridge received a letter from John Adams in the middle of June, in which a new attitude toward England and the settlement of the dispute was clearly manifest.

I am myself as fond of reconciliation, if we could reasonably entertain hopes of it upon a constitutional basis, as any man. But I think, if we consider the education of the sovereign, and that the Lords, the Commons, the electors, the army, the navy, the officers of excise, etc., etc., have now for many years gradually been trained and disciplined by corruption to the system of the court, we shall be convinced that the cancer is too deeply rooted and too far spread to be cured by any thing short of cutting it out entire.<sup>9</sup>

The author went on to add that the people would continue to grasp at sporadic hopes of reconciliation. Powder production would suffer from resultant half-heartedness in the patriot cause, but

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9 John Adams, Works, IX, 356.

the situation still foreshadowed success.

The message of the above quotation indicates that John Adams had advanced to a new conception in his view of the dispute with England. Whether this new outlook countenanced independence is not clear. No words or phrases specifically connoting independence were used, and what fully was meant by "cutting it out" was not signified. Claude Van Tyne, commenting that the phrase indicated "John Adams was for a major operation at once,"<sup>10</sup> would not hazard what the extent of that move was. W. C. Ford<sup>11</sup> believed, however, that in this statement John Adams first declared he was for independence. The mind of John Adams was expressed in the quotation, and the lack of clarity in the latter would indicate a clear decision had not been formulated in the former. That the words did not envisage independence will be seen when the quotation is fitted into the general pattern of attitude current at the moment.

The achievements of the Second Continental Congress measured up to the desires of the man from Braintree at times; at other times they fell short. In June of 1775 the efforts of the representatives were satisfying the demands of the elder

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<sup>10</sup> Claude M. Van Tyne, The War of Independence, New York, 1929, 57.

<sup>11</sup> W. C. Ford, "John Adams," Dictionary of American Biography, New York, 1928, I, 74.

Adams. The Congress, he said, was in deep enough.<sup>12</sup>

The attitude of John Adams at this time was that of a man crossing a bridge, of a man crossing a bridge over his own particular Rubicon. Even though, as was revealed in the letter to Cambridge, a belief was dominant that a new type of step had to be adopted, reconciliation still occasionally was mentioned. To his wife in June, John wrote a comment that there "will be redress or assumption of the powers of governments throughout the continent very soon."<sup>13</sup> In July he sardonically urged that great strides be made to further the colonial position, by the building up of munitions and naval power, by the establishment of state governments, and by the arrest of many tories; then, he said, the door might freely be opened to any prospects of reconciliation.<sup>14</sup> In June an equally sardonic suggestion was made.<sup>15</sup> Though attempts at reconciliation were now under the encouragement of others, not of John, still it seemed the last bit of hope in his soul for reunion had not been destroyed.

A plan of action, as well as a conclusion, was forming in the mind of John Adams. To secure the colonies for the time, it seemed best that governments be formed, local governments.

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12 Adams, Adams, and Warren, Letters, I, 67.

13 Adams and Adams, Familiar Letters, 67.

14 Adams, Adams, and Warren, Letters, I, 88.

15 John Adams, Works, IX, 357.



These governments would supplant the colonial governments which had existed under the crown. It is clear that the substitution of one government for another is really nothing short of revolution. Yet, at the time the full realization of the transformation's significance did not impress John Adams. That a man could advocate the establishment of new governments and the raising of armies, while not having declared himself for a revolution, is on the surface hard to understand. The phenomenon was general, however, at one time or another throughout the colonies in the year 1775, and many of the members of the Continental Congress were noteworthy examples.<sup>16</sup> John Adams in this state was in a period of transition. Nearly a year later he remarked it was his plan all along to form governments first and deliver a proclamation of independence last, it being immaterial and arbitrary, however, in the plan which came first.<sup>17</sup> The statement was made in June of 1776, and the plan was consciously formulated sometime before that month. The gradation of steps, however, had not been formed in the summer of 1775. John Adams in July of 1775 was still on his way to independence; he was groping and taking unsure steps.

In the last days of July,<sup>1775</sup> John Adams clearly set down his view toward the Anglo-American dispute. The present state in

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16 Van Tyne, The War, 58.

17 John Adams, Works, IX, 387.

the colonies, he said, was a "critical situation of affairs, when a revolution seems in the designs of Providence, as important as any that ever happened in the affairs of mankind."<sup>18</sup> The word revolution appears in the Adams' vocabulary here for one of the first times in describing conditions, it is to be noted. The use of the word revealed that the lawyer perceived the direction events and actions were tending. The second word from the quotation to be noted is seems, for in this word hesitation and uncertainty are connoted. At the end of July the representative still was not certain events conclusively indicated complete separation from Great Britain was the only solution. He was affected by a sense of doubt and hesitation, by a sense he signified in the word seems. It might have been said John Adams was almost, but not yet, certain. The decision, moreover, was being carefully considered, as demonstrated by the allusion to the "designs of Providence." It was being weighed in the light of a definite and high set of principles. Conscientiously, then, John Adams was not yet firmly convinced that just principles had been so abrogated as to clearly dictate an absolute break with England.

The members of the Continental Congress exhibited a pessimistic attitude in the summer of 1775, also. The Congress

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 361.

disclosed its view in a letter officially dispatched to Canada. The letter dealt with current problems, and a passage considered the role of the King. "There is yet reason to believe . . . he will at length be undeceived and forbid a licentious Ministry to riot in the ruins of the rights of mankind."<sup>19</sup> The Congress had not succumbed to the degree of despair to which John Adams had fallen, but the first words of the quotation indicated that a great deal of disappointment had already been suffered, and that only a moderate amount of hope at best was believed by a consensus of members to remain for success. John Adams manifested less optimism toward a possibility of reconciliation.

Domestic trials and difficulties averted the attention of the Braintree lawyer for a considerable time during the latter part of 1775. Beginning immediately after the July letter, July 29, which summarized his political views, news came that a brother died. Within the next three months his wife's mother died. And when death was not near, sickness was a concern. The small pox raged through New England and threatened many. Dysentery entered his own household and seriously affected several, including his wife. A maid of the household died from the prevalent maladies. The news of the widespread diseases, but particularly the dangerous situation already existing in his own home,

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<sup>19</sup> United States, Journals of the Continental Congress, 1775, II, 70.

seriously agitated his soul. Under the pressure of such sorrows and worries, affecting the emotions and the mind, concentration on political interests underwent a period of eclipse.

The month of November brought a return to normal in domestic affairs, leaving more time for greater and more intense exertion in the colonial cause again. The Second Continental Congress was still pursuing its business in Philadelphia, and there was no hope for an early cessation of business. John Adams determined to remain at his post, in what he believed was a situation more critical than ever before. Armed preparations, especially in New England, were of prime concern, for it seemed there would be war or negotiations in the spring.<sup>20</sup>

In October John Adams, while writing to his wife in the depths of the distress over family sorrows and illnesses, mentioned the trial the dispute with England had also for some time been for him. He synopsisized the situation. "The thought that we might be driven to the sad necessity of breaking our connection with Great Britain . . . always gave me a great deal of grief."<sup>21</sup> The sorrow, however, John believed could not be escaped, for he went on to add that a strong impression had always existed that things would build up to a critical state. The con-

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20 John Adams, Works, II, 427.

21 Adams and Adams, Familiar Letters, 106.

troversey, it seemed moreover, would never be settled, of which every day brought more confirmation. The major sorrow of this increasingly evident eventuality, he lamented, had marked his recent years. The genuine sorrow aroused by the threatened break with England obviously affected this New Englander, and restraint was a resulting note. It was this emotion coming from consideration of a separation from England that further led John Adams to explore every facet of the dispute with the mother country meticulously, and to withhold decision in the altercation beyond the spring of 1775. It further impelled him to refuse to break with England as long as his convictions evinced no finality. Certainly consideration of this side of the nature of John Adams increases the evidence that he was no radical but a realist, that a decision he reached in the dispute would be reasonable, just, and timely. To emphasize the force of this emotion, a further remark of Adams might be added. Gladly, he said, would he give up public life and all its possibilities if peace and liberty could be obtained.<sup>22</sup> But, he went on to say that never could the right to a free constitution be surrendered to obtain accidental benefits, such as the semblance of peace. The decision to break with England was a very serious act, rationally and sentimentally, therefore, and in October of 1775 had not yet been made.

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22 Ibid.

In the autobiography which John Adams wrote some thirty years after the critical year, 1775, an entirely different cast was given to his attitude of the period. Independence was the desire of his heart, openly, the whole nine months after Lexington, it was said. Again and again the autobiographer gave instances to bear out and prove the assertion. In looking at the Autobiography for evidence relevant to the question investigated in this thesis, or pertaining to any subject for which the work might be consulted, the nature and particular weaknesses of the writing must be remembered. Autobiographies are annals written a considerable time after the occurrence of the events described, and they can be affected and colored by many intervening events. An autobiography is a memoir, relying on the ability and accuracy of the memory to call back incidents long since completed. An autobiography is not an immediate record of acts as they are executed, nor is it an instantaneous accounting of the intentions of acts. This type of writing depends on the memory to reconstruct both action and intention. The Autobiography of John Adams illustrates the difficulties involved in writing a memoir remarkably. Inaccuracies of the opus are evident from documents of the period, even from writings John Adams inscribed during the epoch. Inaccuracies can be caused, however, by more than simple lapse of memory, for bias, as an example and illustrated in the case of John Adams, can be a contributing factor to error.

The outstanding reason for distrusting the Autobiography of John Adams is found in the change through which Mr. Adams passed between the years 1775 and 1805. In the years that intervened within these designated points of time, the most famous son of Braintree became a confirmed egotist, so much so that history also reserves a particular place for him in the roles of those who have become known in this less noteworthy accomplishment. When years had passed and the new century was upon the new country, John Adams saw, not through the proverbial rose-colored glasses, but through glasses which imposed predominately the ego. Thus, when he came to review the events of his life, egotism was ready to assert itself, therefore, and the memoir was composed under this added handicap. Adams illustrated a fault that easily could enter into the view of a person contemplating the past. Looking back at participation in a successful venture, a person tends to credit himself with more earnestness, enthusiasm, and participation in the, not certain, but at the time doubtful enterprise than he had during the actual prosecution of the undertaking.

The memoir of John Adams, therefore, is not excellent source material, and its value is not on a plane with writings he inscribed at the time at which the event described occurred. What this Founding Father wrote at the time an event happened takes precedence over his memories of thirty or forty years, and

the directive of this truth is applied in this thesis. Nowhere, therefore, in this work is a section of John Adams' Autobiography used to substantiate any matter of major importance.

A question might occur whether John Adams ever recorded his intimate opinions on the things around him during the Revolutionary period. Certainly there are many volumes extant of his writings; yet, it might be objected, was he not circumspect in his writing during the era rebellion was only meditated through fear of retribution, should rebellious literature fall into the hands of an enemy. If such a major fear caused John to guard his pen, then his true sentiments and an accurate reflection of his mind did not appear on paper.

The response to the question herein proposed is found in the writings of John Adams themselves. The man from New England had an insatiable desire to write. His wife would have received several letters a day if it were at all feasible in the communications of the day. A person writing a great deal will unfold much of his soul on the pages of letters, diaries, and other writings. Much of his time, also, immediately previous to 1776 was spent in long periods continuously away from home and close friends, leaving only one manner of communicating and exchanging thoughts, by letter. To look a little closer, indications are found in what was written as well, to show that the mind of Adams was inscribed. In the early years of the contro-



versy, for example, from 1766 on, there appears no evidence of any inclination to censor the diary. Descriptions of persons' characters and personality faults sporadically are injected which would have resulted, if seen by an interested party, in serious repercussions for John Adams. In 1774, in the diary also, a day's writing recorded that more tea would be thrown into the harbor that night. Yet John Adams always asserted that his knowledge of things connected with the violence along the wharves was at a minimum. He, thus, seemed to record what he did know and wished to record. To persuade any authorities, moreover, of his innocence, after they might have read foreknowledge of this tea party in his little book, again demonstrates Adams approached the diary uninhibited.

In the letters John Adams wrote there was an air of freedom. That no restraint curbed his efforts in this type of writing is evident in several ways. In February of 1775 some people failed to deliver letters committed to their care by Adams. Above all these people viewed the contents of the missives. The offended author bemoaned the failings, but he remarked that he did not care if the people saw the contents.<sup>23</sup> Usually the couriers of Adams' letters were trusted friends, removing all reasonable fears of betrayal, and leaving the way

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<sup>23</sup> Adams, Adams, and Warren, Letters, I, 39.

open for freedom of expression. Secrecy or confidence was enjoined occasionally in letters, a constant number of which contained military information of value to the enemy. Inclusion of such compromising information as military data easily leads to the conclusion all other types of information were included. Even after a letter was intercepted by the English in July of 1775 and made the subject of a great deal of propaganda, inclusion of military plans continued. The continuance of the practice was soon indicated by a missive sent in October which outlined a very secret plot to steal badly needed powder right out from under the guns of the English.<sup>24</sup> For a period of about two months, at the end of the year 1775, the activity of the English seemed to curb the New Englander's writing instincts. By the end of the year, however, the restraining effect of the English activity was extinct. The ruse of not affixing a signature, or else of forging a name, was adopted at this time, to adjust for awhile to English industry. In the writings of John Adams which are important source material for the period discussed in this thesis, therefore, there was a freedom of action by the author which overruled any inhibitions to a frank inscription of his mind. John Adams was not deterred from speaking his thoughts. It has well been said: "He was never the victim of mob psychol-

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24 Ibid., 134.

egy, and he was never careful of circumstances in speaking out his convictions."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Vernon L. Parrington, The Colonial Mind, New York, 1927, 308.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE YEAR OF GREAT DECISIONS, 1776

John Adams crossed the Rubicon of independence at the beginning of the year 1776. The decision was the subject of much consideration, as has been seen, and when once made was decisively made. The step was but a small advance over the position held in previous months. In the months before the step, all the elements of despair were in an advanced stage of development. But a decisive conclusion had not been made. When the evidence overwhelmed all objections and sentiment, then John Adams culminated a stand that for some time had forecast his ultimate judgement, and declared for separation of the colonies from England.

The change of attitude was manifest in the early part of 1776. Mr. Adams was home for a few weeks at the end of December and at the beginning of January, and, when he returned to Philadelphia, northward letters contained a new approach. The Continental Congress clarified its views toward independence in the month of January, and John Adams personally did likewise.

On January 8, 1776 a lengthy discussion on the merits of various types of government was prepared and dispatched to a

close friend, Mrs. Mercy Warren. The credits and debits consequent on monarchies and on republics were set down to help this friend determine the best type of government for the colonies. Mrs. Warren requested aid on a question she believed of proximate, if not immediate, importance. John Adams included his own personal opinion also. Many advantages, he mused, accrued to the people in a monarchy, at least to those who ruled, among whom Adams believed he would be numbered were a monarchy ever to be established in America. The wealthy in a republic, on the other hand, hardly knew the delights the nobility of a kingdom tasted. A republican form of government, moreover, demanded considerable virtue among its members. But, when the man from Braintree came to select the form of government under which he would wish to live, the republican form was the type he clearly chose. He told Mrs. Warren he was "so tasteless as to prefer a republic, if we must erect an independent government in America, which you know is utterly against my inclinations."<sup>1</sup> A republic seemed to recommend itself above and beyond a monarchy because of the excellence and virtue that would exist within the country.

At the same time John Adams went on to add that the colonies must erect an independent government. Each colony, it was asserted, must have its own state government, established by

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1 Adams, Adams, and Warren, Letters, I, 201.

a written constitution. The governments of the thirteen colonies must then confederate, forming a firm union of the colonies. And this union in its formation was to be independent of parliament and of the King.<sup>2</sup> In this statement was contained John Adams' personal proclamation for independence. A complete break no longer seemed, but was, the only solution. Independence had to be the goal of the colonies thenceforward. In January, <sup>1776</sup> therefore, this delegate from Massachusetts arrived at a clear ultimate stand in his attitude toward England. Hesitation and a negative approach no longer had place in his plan. A clear positive program was set as the guide to future actions.

The Prohibitory Act, passed by King George's government on December 22, 1775 was the immediate occasion which caused John Adams' decision for independence. In this Act England declared the plan for requiring absolute American submission to any and all English wishes was a permanent policy. The Act told the people in America in effect that all possibility of resting terms from England had vanished. The Act proclaimed the colonies beyond the protection of the mother country, laid an embargo on all trade, and declared a blockade of America ports. To John Adams the significance of the Act meant not so much that America separated itself from the mother country, as that England severed

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2 Bowen, John Adams, 552.

the colonies from herself,<sup>3</sup> For Adams the final irrevocable step had occurred.

The Prohibitory Act caused widespread reaction throughout the colonies. John Adams was not alone in noting the event. In America there were few men who would not have preferred to remain subject to England, were it possible. Only one man, Sam Adams, had cast off all desire for cordial relations with Great Britain. A number of men previous to the Act, however, were becoming increasingly conscious of the difference between the state the emotions preferred and the state reality dictated. An unyielding John Bull, it seemed, was set on the complete subjugation of the colonies, or, failing that, on the absolute ruin of America. The Prohibitory Act brought men face-to-face with a clear choice, perhaps abruptly for some, between subjugation and independence. A number of men chose independence at the beginning of 1776. Others, from sentimentality or in the fear of the effects of disruption, continued to hope for reconciliation.<sup>4</sup> Still others wished utter subjection.

The men in the Continental Congress after the beginning of 1776 were divided into two factions. One group, led by John

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<sup>3</sup> Carl Becker, The Eve of the Revolution, New Haven, 1918, 242.

<sup>4</sup> Carl Becker, The Declaration of Independence, New York, 1922, 127-128.

Dickinson, James Duane, and James Wilson, still clung to hopes for reconciliation. The second group, which had abandoned all expectation of settlement of the dispute within the empire, was led by Christopher Gadsden, the two Lees, George Wythe, and the two Adamses. In the colonies there still existed many Tories, men loyal and devoted to England, but the group no longer had a voice in the direction of the Continental Congress or the channel colonial affairs were following.<sup>5</sup>

George Washington was far along the road to independence at the beginning of 1776. The great man would be influenced by no one, but he was becoming exasperated to the breaking point in the continued and increasing tempo of the controversy. In 1774 he was very solicitous that no member of the Congress be motivated by a desire for independence. Until 1776, otherwise, he spoke little of the disposition of the dispute. On January 31, 1776, however, in an incensed tone Washington declared that a few more skirmishes, added to the effect of Paine's Common Sense, would cause many to decide for independence.<sup>6</sup> Ten days later it was stated that the measures of the English government after Bunker Hill had been convincing proof no accommodation would

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5 Bowen, John Adams, 551-552.

6 George Washington, The Writings of George Washington, edited by John C. Fitzpatrick, Washington, 1931, IV, 297.



follow. The continued rebuke of just colonial petitions, plus the inhuman and unnatural determination of England, now made it imperative that the colonies warn England to desist immediately or face a subject country determined to shake off all political attachments. Since the tone of the letter intimated hope for redress no longer existed, Washington in the beginning of February was, for all practical purposes, in favor of independence.<sup>7</sup> The army leader was preceded by Adams in deciding for independence; Washington, however, was the quicker of the two in demanding a formal declaration.

The first letter of John Adams upon his return to Philadelphia was replete with both melancholy and belligerence. Lowness of spirit, it was found, pervaded the atmosphere in the Quaker city, causing an emotion approaching despondency. No likelihood of a change, moreover, existed "until late in the spring, when some critical event will take place, perhaps sooner."<sup>8</sup> Whether the crucial event boded good or ill Adams was ready to answer. The Sovereign of the world alone knew, he said, but experience, probabilities, and appearances all taught that the colonial efforts would "roll on to dominion and glory."<sup>9</sup>

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7 Ibid., 321.

8 Adams and Adams, Familiar Letters, 132-133.

9 Ibid.

On February 18 the busy Mr. Adams reiterated his new attitude toward independence. He still winced at the import of the declaration, but there was also greater vehemence in his demands now. The man from Braintree declared in a tone of strong conviction: "Reconciliation if practicable and peace if attainable, you very well know, would be as agreeable to my inclinations and as advantageous to my interest as to any man's. But I see no prospect, no probability, no possibility."<sup>10</sup> A surge of impatience came and a sharp outburst followed. John Adams inveighed: "And I cannot but despise the understanding which sincerely expects an honorable peace, for its credulity, and detest the hypocritical heart which pretends to expect it, when in truth it does not."<sup>11</sup> Not a backward glance could have been cast on his own past as he wrote this last sentence, on times when he was not so resolute. Recollection of his own indecision and slow progress would have softened his view of others. John Adams by this time, however, had made his decision, and his progress was now manifest in increasing fervor in that decision. Another instance of short memory will be seen in connection with the debate over an explicit declaration of independence.

From February on events moved swiftly. Once John Adams

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10 Ibid., 135.

11 Ibid.

decided for independence, his major attention was centered on the method of fully realizing it. Methods of furthering the goal, not whether to aim at it, occupied his thinking in 1776. One of the most difficult things in the path, he realized in April, was the eventual changeover from old to new governments. This problem, how the colonies could glide insensibly from life under the old government to the initiation of submission to new authority, long had faced the lawyer. It posed one of the most difficult and dangerous obstacles to be hurdled, he believed. The question of government was ever on Adams' mind, and a month later, in May, concrete measures regarding government were proposed in the Continental Congress.

Another measure to be considered in the march toward actual independence was the advisability of a public declaration. Should the colonies formally and officially pronounce themselves before the whole world as irrevocably separated from England? The proposal was being discussed in various parts of the colonies and some friends of Adams queried their delegate on the desirability of the move. John, however, in April of 1776 exhibited no particular concern over the measure. "Have we not," he declared on April 18, "been independent these twelve months minus three days? Is this and the acts passed not enough?"<sup>12</sup> John Adams was

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<sup>12</sup> Adams, Adams, and Warren, Letters, I, 227.

persuaded the situation wanted little, that the state which had existed for a year and which the colonies were preparing to continue, was for the present a satisfactory substitute for formal independence. In an obviously reluctant manner he nevertheless added that people should write their delegates, if they felt strongly on the matter. Jealousies, Adams agreed, formerly would have followed an official pronouncement, splitting the colonies; now the danger of convulsion no longer stood in the way. When independence by the ordinary course of events would be formally and explicitly proclaimed was not certain. "Perhaps the time is near, perhaps a great way off."<sup>13</sup> Personally, Mr. Adams in April was not solicitous about an immediate formal declaration of independence.

Two months later, just before July 4, John Adams tended to forget his personal history again. On July 3, 1776, the man from Braintree bemoaned the fact a formal declaration had not been proclaimed seven months before.<sup>14</sup> Benefits, such as alliances with foreign states, as well as the preservation of Canada as an ally, would long since have accrued to the colonies, had action then been taken. The irresoluteness of others in the colonies was blamed for the misfortunes following upon the tar-

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<sup>13</sup> Adams and Adams, Familiar Letters, 153.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 192.

diness.<sup>15</sup> John Adams, however, should have hearkened back to the history of his own attitude toward a declaration. Therein he would have found a sage commentary on the actions and motives of the times, and he would have discovered ample solace for his regret. The absurdity of the notion, furthermore, that independence might have been adopted in December would have so quickly and so strongly asserted itself, that all further consideration would immediately have been suppressed.

The views of John Adams toward a formal declaration changed during May and June of 1776. His opinion were changed by the exigency of circumstances and the turn of events. The mutation resulted from a gradual development. For months a prime concern of the Braintree lawyer was the establishment of new governments in the colonies, especially in those areas where the old government had ceased to function. The need particularly perturbed the lawyer in him. At the beginning of May Adams offered a resolve in the Congress that the colonies should be instructed to form, if they had not already, their own independent governments. The resolve was approved on May 10, and, to note the importance of the proclamation, Adams was appointed to write a preamble. In the resulting introduction the delegate emphasized not only the formation of new governments, but that inde-

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15 John Adams, Works, IX, 419.

pendence should be a note of these governments. So strongly did he stress the element of independence that, on reflection, he called the document a declaration of independence. The directive to the colonies is now known as a moderate declaration. Adams' words<sup>16</sup> were well chosen, however, for the message of the document was radical. The document as approved on May 15 stated that "it appears utterly irreconcilable to reason and good conscience for the people of these colonies now to take oaths and affirmations necessary for the support of any government under the crown of Great Britain."<sup>17</sup> The preamble was approved by a vote of seven colonies to five.

John Adams presumed an ordered plan should be followed by the colonies in the attainment of complete independence. The delegate believed that in a reasonable and logical plan of action governments should first be formed in the colonies. These governments should then confederate and define the continental constitution. The third step would find the colonies declaring themselves a sovereign state. The last step would envision the creation of treaties with foreign nations. The resolution on May 6 set out to execute the first step. The directive with its preamble, however, discussed independence at length also. During

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<sup>16</sup> Adams and Adams, Familiar Letters, 173.

<sup>17</sup> United States, Journals of the Continental Congress, IV, 358.

the rest of the month a debate raged in the mind of John Adams whether wisdom dictated continuance of the orderly plan or substitution and immediate execution of the third step. Should the plan be followed, he wondered, or did expediency in the prevailing circumstances command resolute execution of the third step immediately.<sup>18</sup>

In the very first part of June John Adams ascertained that events dictated an immediate declaration of independence. The move had gained favor in various parts of the colonies. Adams stated: "But I fear we cannot proceed systematically, and that we shall be obliged to declare ourselves independent before we confederate, and indeed before all the colonies have established their governments."<sup>19</sup> As Adams waxed ardent in this resolve, many reasons were adduced to substantiate the wisdom of an immediate declaration. A spirited declaration would hasten the completion of governments, would increase the production of supplies for the army, would split rather than unite the dissatisfied populace of England, and would give new vigor to American arms. One other reason was also listed. France would never make any treaty, even of commerce, until an explicit declaration of complete separation, or independence, from Great Britain had been

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18 John Adams, Works, IX, 397.

19 Ibid.

made.<sup>20</sup> The persuasive force of the latter argument was probably not minor by any means. At all events, John Adams believed the world should hear a ringing proclamation from America soon.

The first formal move toward an official declaration was not long in coming. On June 7 Richard Henry Lee, at the direction of his constituents, proposed to the Continental Congress a resolution proclaiming independence. John Adams immediately seconded the motion, and, after Congress deferred action on the measure for three weeks, found his name on a committee of five to draw up an official declaration. The writing of the document the committee then entrusted to the artful pen of Thomas Jefferson.

The remainder of June was devoted to the many business-  
es at hand, as well as to reflection on the momentous resolution offered on June 7. He synthesized the situation of the particular moment in a sentence: "We are in the very midst of a revolution, the most complete, unexpected, and remarkable of any in the history of nations."<sup>21</sup> A quick review of recent events and consideration of the transition in motion caused wonder. And later he remarked: "I am surprised at the suddenness and greatness of this revolution."<sup>22</sup> So quickly were events moving that, when John paused to reflect, the full import of the advance and of the

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20 Ibid., 409.

21 Ibid., 391.

22 Ibid., 418.



fullness of the change made him marvel.

The events of the first days in July filled his heart with anxiety, but when completed with utter satisfaction. The three weeks postponement of final consideration, due to division in the Congress, implied a doubtful outcome and fostered perturbation. The move for a formal declaration was peremptory, for the colonies were not fully prepared for the momentous step. Great decisions were made in a short time, however, and, when the final vote was taken, the resolution for independence carried. Thereupon, the Congress immediately took up the matter of the formal proclamation written by Thomas Jefferson. Discussion was extensive and at times involved. The dominant figure arguing on the floor for adoption of the Declaration was John Adams. Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration but a man seldom heard to speak from the floor, lauded his efforts. The man from Virginia said of Adams: "He was the pillar of its support on the floor of Congress."<sup>23</sup>

With all his heart and mind John Adams believed in July that independence was the step for the colonies to take. That all his beliefs and assertions had been proper and just and that the colonies were following a correct and fully justified course he firmly declared. Principle was a strong point with this New

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23 Thomas Jefferson, The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, edited by F. L. Ford, New York, 1898, IX, 377-378.

Englander, but he sincerely believed principle and justice had been scrupulously regarded. Thus, since principle had consistently been on the side of the colonies, the last step in the dispute was but another move in the path of righteousness.

The most certain evidence of John Adams' inner conviction and guilelessness is found in his faith that the American cause was in the designs of Providence. Repeatedly in the auspicious days prior to the adoption of the Declaration of Independence the man's writings proclaim an entire confidence the efforts of the colonies were not without powerful help. Every event up to July 1776 seemed to him to be guided from above. Five days after the introduction of the resolution for independence, the man who seconded the resolve wrote: "We have no recourse left, my friend, but our own fortitude and the power of Heaven. If we have the first I have no doubt we shall obtain the last, and these shall be sufficient."<sup>24</sup> Two weeks later, while speaking of the colonial efforts in Canada, he was very explicit in enunciating his belief. More resolute action, he stated, would not have "occasioned us to do the work of the Lord deceitfully in Canada and elsewhere."<sup>25</sup> Identical in Canada were the efforts of the colonists and the desires of the Lord! In the momentous

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24 John Adams, Works, IX, 393.

25 Ibid., 413.

hours of July 3, after the resolution for independence was approved, John Adams solemnly declared: "It is the will of Heaven that the two countries should be sundered forever."<sup>26</sup>

The utter conviction of this patriot in the justice and righteousness of the American cause is a noteworthy sidelight in the history of the American Revolution. The statements made in June and July of 1776 highlighted the beliefs of John Adams, for they came at a time which was the consummation of all the actions and intentions in the dispute with England. The summer of 1776 was the fulfillment of the past. The events of this summer were also the herald of the future. The more nobly an undertaking begins and the more upright its heritage, the greater will be its chances of success. The events and principles which dominate at a project's inception will mark its subsequent history. The independent colonies had an auspicious start, as notably instanced in the lives of certain of the leading men in 1776. John Adams was one of the great men in early American history and outstanding in the Revolutionary development. His sincere beliefs in the destiny of America, coupled with his wholesome example, have ever been offered to all Americans since as salutary encouragement in their contemporary difficulties.

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26 Adams and Adams, Familiar Letters, 191.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

Principle was a mainstay in the life of John Adams, forming a steady basis both for consequential as well as incidental events in his life. An understanding of the part principle played is the key to a study and interpretation of Adams' attitude toward England. A comprehension of this characteristic forestalls probing for rank arbitrariness. Principle formed the foundation for John Adams' opposition to England and underlay the pattern of increasing hopelessness. As it became more and more evident England was engaging in a concerted policy to deprive Americans of their liberties, the opposition of Mr. Adams grew stronger and expectation of a settlement of the dispute grew less. The more Adams' principles were buffeted and the more obstinately they were abrogated, the more convinced became the patriot, first, that only bloodshed could result, and, secondly, that the colonies must set out on a course of their own.

The accurate study of John Adams' reaction through the years to English encroachment on American liberties produces a pattern. It is a pattern of gradation, of gradation from one step away from England to the next. The steps are the reason-

able, logical moves that would follow in the wake of increasing hopelessness and gradual withdrawal from England. The withdrawal, certainly, could have been made suddenly. Were John Adams to have acted in this manner, his utter determination for independence would have begun in the year 1765. The accuracy of this approximate date is asserted by some authors. John Adams by nature and by training, however, would not, nor did he in 1765, act on fragmentary evidence. The issues of the American Revolution only slowly became manifest, and beyond this more time was demanded to ascertain the fixed nature of the differences. The hostility of America grew as the determination to subjugate the colonies completely to the English will was perceived and its indestructibility became more evident. Resistance began and slowly increased in the same manner on the part of John Adams.

In the pattern, steps were taken which the intensity of the moment's hopelessness dictated. America, as far as the lawyer from Braintree was concerned, was driven or thrust away from England; the colonies did not seek the separation. During the years 1765-1773, thus, a reserve ruled the attitude toward the mother country, resulting from serious exceptions on the part of England to proper political relationships which should exist among elements of an empire. Hope for cessation of the arbitrary acts, however, existed. But, in 1774 hope decreased when responsibility for the tyrannical policy shifted from colonial author-

ities to the dominant political party in England. That armed conflict might occur before settlement of the dispute became a serious possibility, also. In 1775 independence appeared on the horizon as a possibility. After Lexington, moreover, there was no expectation the controversy would be settled on terms honorable and acceptable to the colonies within the empire. Adams was not thoroughly and utterly certain the situation dictated a break from England, exhibiting as a result much of the attitude and conduct of a revolutionary but without the full manifest intention. One certitude, that of eventual fighting, replaced and advanced a previous doubt. In 1776 all uncertainty regarding the propriety of separation fell when news of the Prohibitory Act was published. As 1776 progressed, fervor in a positive plan increased. An immediate formal proclamation of independence at first appeared inappropriate, but soon became very proper. And in the deliberations concerning the official announcement of a new state, John Adams stood out amidst the illustrious men at the Congress.

The particular degree of opposition peculiar to each period is found only by studying all the statements of the period, by constructing a pattern within that certain small epoch of time. A thorough study of everything written during a period yields an adequate picture of the man's attitude toward England, the influential arguments of the moment, and his momentary views

toward particular questions. In this manner, and only in this manner, can the attitude toward England at a certain time be found. Chance phrases because of unclear or ambiguous language can mislead, of which misconstruction instances can be found in many books. The establishment of a pattern provides the only reasonable path to the interpretation of obscure passages. Unclear sections must be explained by the attitude of the period.

[ The purpose of this thesis, then, has been discharged. The attitude of John Adams toward England, period by period, has been traced from his birth to 1776. At a definite place in the resulting pattern, a line has been drawn, signifying the dividing point between non-revolutionary and revolutionary tenets. To determine the time when John Adams decided for independence was the goal of the thesis. Conversely, the aim also was to rule out all other points in his life, asserted by one author or another to be the deciding moments in John Adams' march to independence. By presuming through reason there was only one hour of decision, and by the evidence of fact, it has been demonstrated the time of resolution was singular, not multiple. Not all the commentators, thus, are right. The accuracy of an author's statement may be determined by the manner in which his assertion corresponds to or deviates from the evidence in John Adams' writings.

John Adams was one of the participants in the American Revolution who decided for colonial independence early, early,

that is, in the general movement toward a break from England. That his action was precipitous, or that his earliness far exceeded the average hour instanced in the lives of other men, is untrue. The sizeable faction ready and determined for independence after the Prohibitory Act included the name of John Adams. This Act was passed only six months before the Declaration of Independence. A number entered the fold of those set on independence shortly before July 4, 1776. These latter as well as those who lagged farther behind, John Adams of course preceded. Mr. Adams, however, was in no sense a radical, but simply a man who more closely followed and better knew the significance of events. A clear analysis of the issues was his, the conclusion of which he asserted favored the colonies. He was not, however, a man without devotion to the mother country, as was fully exemplified in his early life and in the sorrow caused in the separation from England. Justice, nevertheless, demanded the break. John Adams, in a succinct epitome outlining the history of his relationship with England, was a liberty-loving colonist who manifested great devotion to established government, but even greater devotion to principle.



## CRITICAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

### I. PRIMARY SOURCES

Adams, John, The Works of John Adams, edited and with a biography by Charles Francis Adams, 10 vols., Boston, 1851-1856.

In these volumes are contained the diary, numerous letters, newspaper articles, and documents John Adams wrote in the two decades previous to July 4, 1776. Also contained in the volumes are the memoirs, the value of which has been discussed in the body of the thesis. These volumes are primary sources that must be consulted in any serious study of the life of John Adams.

Adams, John, and Adams, Abigail, The Familiar Letters of John Adams and His Wife, edited by Charles Francis Adams, New York, 1878.

Besides the letters contained in the Works, Charles Francis Adams compiled a volume of letters limited specifically to letters between John Adams and his wife. Communications between a husband and wife would be important, but doubly important would they be in the instance, such as that in the life of John and Abigail, when the couple are well mated in a happy marriage. The revelations contained in the Familiar Letters, thus, must be closely examined in an investigation of the life of John Adams, and their value should be considered accurate in depicting the mind of the patriot.

Adams, John, Adams, Samuel, and Warren, James, The Warren-Adams Letters, (2 vols.; Boston, 1925.)

The letters written by these men and included in these volumes are enlightening and instructive. James Warren was one of John Adams' best friends, receiving as a result the confidence of a brother. Some of the letters John wrote this man during the year 1775, for example, are among the most informative remains of the period. Both James Warren and Sam Adams kept pace with, if they did not exceed, the advance of John Adams. The similarity of minds led to an easy

interchange of ideas.

Jefferson, Thomas, The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, edited by P. L. Ford, 10 vols., New York, 1892-1899.

The prominent part of Thomas Jefferson's writings relative to the pre-War period are memoirs, suffering as a result from the drawbacks of this type of literature. The letters of the period are of value in furthering knowledge of the attitude leading patriots maintained before July 4, 1776.

United States, Library of Congress, Journals of the Continental Congress, edited by W. C. Ford, Vols. I-V, Washington, 1904-1907.

The Journals give some idea of the Continental Congress. Since only official pronouncements were admitted to the records, little knowledge comparatively of the opinions of individuals or of the subjects discussed is had. John Adams, also, later claimed the officers of the Congress through dislike failed to inscribe his name as often as it could have appeared. The Journals give the official attitude of the Congress, or, in other words, the attitude that finally prevailed or evolved from the discordant demands proffered by the members of the Congress.

Washington, George, The Writings of George Washington, edited by John C. Fitzpatrick, Vols. I-V, Washington, 1931.

The views of the most illustrious man in the country's history must be consulted. Washington's views in the years 1774 to 1776 also are of importance since the great man endeavored to remain clear of the two extreme parties, those advancing rapidly toward independence and those utterly opposed to it. That he did not wish to be publicly connected with any party does not mean he did not have his private opinions.

## II. SECONDARY SOURCES

### A. BOOKS

Adams, James Truslow, The Adams Family, New York, 1930.

The knowledge of John Adams this author exhibits in his book makes a reader wonder if the author had any more than a cursory acquaintance with the writings of John Adams. The book is marked by erroneous statements, interpretations, and generalizations, and rests for its worth on the authority of James Truslow Adams.

Adams, Randolph, Political Ideas of the American Revolution, Durham, 1922.

No commentator understood John Adams better than Randolph Adams. This author, through his thorough study and understanding of the political and theoretical beliefs of the lawyer from Braintree, was able to obtain a true conspectus of the life of the man and to perceive fully the arguments and motives that influenced him. Other authors tend to err in the extent that they are not cognizant of all the factors important in the formation of the patriot's judgment.

Becker, Carl, The Eve of the Revolution, New Haven, 1918.

A recognized authority herein inscribed a worthy volume, describing the critical days leading up to July 4, 1776.

Becker, Carl, The Declaration of Independence, New York, 1922.

In this volume the arguments which influenced the men who wrote the Declaration of Independence are skillfully discussed and historically traced. Incidents in the revolutionary development of the leading colonials are ably portrayed.

Bowen, Catherine Drinker, John Adams and the American Revolution, Boston, 1950.

This author compiled an almost day-to-day log of John Adams' first forty-one years. Citations, with interesting explanations, from relevant primary sources are simply juxtaposed as their position fits chronologically. The background for incidents in John's life was gleaned from lengthy study and travel.

Burnett, Edmund C., The Continental Congress, New York, 1941.

For a study of the Continental Congress this book is a valuable offering by an authority on the assembly.

Chinnard, Gilbert, Honest John Adams, Boston, 1933.

The early life of John Adams is well treated in this book. The era just prior to the Declaration of Independence receives a brief treatment.

Cronin, J. W., and H. W. Wise, A Bibliography of John Adams and John Quincy Adams, Washington, 1935.

This is an exhaustive bibliography of printed works connected with the names of these two men. The compilation includes all writings up to the year 1935. The Bibliography is a valuable guidepost for any close examination into the life of John Adams.

Fisher, Sydney G., The True History of the American Revolution, Philadelphia, 1902.

This author credits the colonists with more deliberateness than honest indecision in the days of uncertainty before the Declaration of Independence.

Howard, George E., Preliminaries of the Revolution: 1763-1775, Vol. VIII of the American Nation: A History, edited by Albert Bushnell Hart, 28 vols., New York, 1904-1918.

This commendable history narrates the forces at work and in conflict in the years preceding 1776.

McCoy, Samuel Duff, This Man Adams, the Man Who Never Died, New York, 1928.

Comments on John Adams' development toward independence occasionally occur in this book. Since no pattern or complete picture is constructed, the author is led astray by seemingly possible interpretations of chance statements.

Miller, John C., The Origins of the American Revolution, Boston, 1943.

The belief is advanced in this volume that some colonists fully favored independence for quite some time. These men, however, while secretly favoring a complete break from England, publicly proclaimed doctrines far different. The author might have considered, however, that men pervaded with a plan will not as a rule openly speak out against it and

counter their wishes. The consultation of sources manifested in this book is noteworthy.

Morse, J. T., John Adams, New York, 1885.

In this volume is found the simple biography of a great man. Adams is said to have had a plan for the attainment of independence for a considerable time. His desires, however, he kept to himself, and patiently watched and hoped for the gradual fulfillment of separation from England. Realization of his extremeness led him to curb external manifestations of his wishes and to work covertly.

Parrington, Vernon Louis, The Colonial Mind, New York, 1927.

Prof. Parrington concerned himself principally with the Adams' development after 1775. Of the pre-War Adams a noteworthy description of character is given. The author, also, endeavored to understand the importance of Adams' political theories. Prof. Parrington failed to perceive that John Adams penetrated beyond a constitutional basis for colonial rights to a basis in nature.

Van Doren, Carl, The Secret History of the American Revolution, New York, 1941.

Only the first pages of this book are concerned with the period prior to July 4, 1776. In these pages a brief enlightening glance at the days of indecision is found.

Van Tyne, Claude H., The War of Independence, New York, 1929.

A leading authority on the American Revolution wrote a penetrating interpretation of the movements and events leading up to the Revolution. The book is excellent background material for a specific study.

## B. ARTICLES

Chamberlain, Mellen, "John Adams, the Statesman of the American Revolution," John Adams, the Statesman of the American Revolution, with Other Essays, New York, 1898.

This lengthy essay exemplifies the less scholarly approach of the last century. Errors occur which assiduous study of

the writings of John Adams easily could have averted. The author manifested an able understanding of much of the patriot's life, and his attempt to interpret Adams' place in the Revolution was noteworthy.

Ford, Worthington C., "John Adams," The Dictionary of American Biography, New York, 1928, I, 72-77.

The life and important events in the history of John Adams are ably and succinctly listed in this article. The space limitations of the article leave the questions resulting from the brief treatment unanswered.

MacDonald, William, "American Public Writing: 1760-1783," Cambridge History of American Literature, New York, 1933, I, 124-150.

A brief sketch of the Anglo-American dispute is enhanced by the injection of sidelights which were significant in important events.

APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Joseph James Hermiller has been read and approved by three members of the Department of History.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

Jan. 20, 1953  
Date

Paul Finney  
Signature of Adviser